

ALSO: CHICAGO // MUNICH // AUCKLAND // LAOS // IRELAND // SRI LANKA



THE SOUND OF SNOWFLAKES

In wintertime in the Arctic, there is nothing more magic than snowflakes dropping silently from the sky, except when you hear them!

Can you really hear a snowflake? Of course you can! But first you have to try to live life like Greenlanders do; connect to the present moment – for instance by turning off your electronic devices for a while.

It will give you a rare opportunity to truly connect with yourself or other people that matter to you. And how about doing that somewhere in the 99.9 per cent of Greenland's land surface that is not populated? For instance at this place, Ilulissat Icefjord, where you can gaze at the stars, the aurora borealis and icebergs.

In the midst of fells and frozen fjords you will see the simple beauty of our most delicate mineral that has ended up shaping our country through thousands of years: Snow! You will smell fresh air like it smelled back in Polar Exploration's Golden Age. And the loudest 'noise' you will hear will be distinct squeaking sounds from your boots as you step on the newly fallen snowflakes.

Let Air Greenland help you to connect to what really matters, and to over 30 silent, and snow-covered destinations around our country.

greenland.com / greenlandin3minutes.com



Snowshoeing in Ilulissat

Seeing a UNESCO World Heritage Site from first row with snowshoes strapped to your feet is otherworldly and unforgettable. And believe it or not, even though this place has become iconic over the past 10 - 15 years, even in the peak of winter season you won't meet hordes of people there – if any at all.



Northern Lights in Nuuk

Chasing the northern lights in Greenland's capital is easy. This Arctic 'minipolis' of only 17,000 inhabitants lies smack in the middle of the auroral belt stretching across the entire Arctic north. The only question you have to answer is whether you would like to watch them from the sea or from firm ground.



Dogsledding in Uummannaq

As the fjord freezes over in wintertime, Uummannaq looses its distinct character of being an island in the midst of one of Greenland's most stunning and picturesque landscapes. Meet some of the most hospitable locals in the country, and go dogsledding among icebergs stuck in the completely frozen fjord.

Photo: Paul Zizka, Mads Pihl & John Kjær - Visit Greenland

Listen to the silence at Ilulissat Icefjord

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*According to Global Traveler
**According to BusinessTraveller.
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December
2017

Contents



100

80 Ice adventures
Forget skiing on pristine pistes, there are plenty of other reasons to embrace the cold

100 Namibia
Head to the stark, sweltering desert, where life thrives in the unlikeliest conditions

112 Romania
Traditions and spectacular nature abound in the Danube Delta at Europe's eastern limit

122 In pictures: Sri Lanka
The hill country is infused with a British influence that dates back to its colonial days as Ceylon

134 City life: Chicago
In this dazzling city — the original home of the yuppie — change is a way of life

144 City life: Palermo
Boisterous back streets and anarchic open-air markets in the picturesque Sicilian capital



Issue 61

A climber 80ft below the surface of Langjokull Glacier, Iceland
IMAGE: Getty

CLONER

December
2017

Contents



19



25



162

SMART TRAVELLER

17 Snapshot
Shoe designer Paul Harnden in Brighton

19 Editors' picks
These are a few of our favourite things

20 Big picture
Divers in Cape Town for the AOP Awards

22 On trend
Beyond borders: going off the grid

25 What's new
Don't bug out, but it's insects for dinner

27 Trail blazing
A new Civil Rights trail in the Deep South

28 Do it now
Are martial arts just for kicks?

31 Food
Raising a glass to Hungarian wine

33 On the trail
Cameras at the ready for Hong Kong's street art

34 Rooms
The Italian port city of Genoa

36 Family
Is it too late to meet Father Christmas?

39 Top 5
Dallas's food finds, as told by a local

41 Stay at home
Country charm in Lavenham, Suffolk

43 The word
A traveller's Christmas wish list

46 Events: Travel Geeks Silk Road
Plus, a look back at our first ever Festival

51 Author series
Andrew May plots a path to the red planet

52 View from the USA
Aaron Millar visits Prince's Paisley Park

54 Online
Highlights from *natgeotraveller.co.uk*

INSIDER

56 Weekender: County Mayo
Perfect for a scenic road trip

60 Eat: Laos
Spicy, often bitter, and nothing like Thai

67 Neighbourhood: Munich
The softer side of the Bavarian capital

72 Sleep: Auckland
Stylish beds in New Zealand's biggest city

TRAVEL GEEKS

154 Travel Geeks
The experts' travel manual

162 Cuba: Like an American
What's a 'people-to-people' exchange?

168 Solo travel
Group travel for like-minded solo travellers

GET IN TOUCH

184 Subscriptions
Wrap up your Christmas presents early

185 Inbox
Your letters, emails and tweets

186 Your pictures
This month's best travel photos

DON'T MISS

14 Photography Competition
The annual competition is now open

121 Reader offer
Discounted trips with Holiday Direction

Competition **Win a nine-night luxury trip to Malaysia, p.45**

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Contributors



Stephanie Cavagnaro

Covered by desert and plagued by drought, Namibia may seem one of the harshest places to survive. But instead of only arid wilds I found resilient life — from resourceful beetles to one of the world's largest cheetah populations. **NAMIBIA P.100**



Daniel Allen

You leave the road and your troubles behind when you enter Romania's remote Danube Delta. For those who want to experience authentic Romanian culture, this region's rustic charm and dramatic nature combine to enchanting effect. **ROMANIA P.112**



Nigel Richardson

Poet Carl Sandburg called Chicago 'City of the Big Shoulders'. I get what he meant. The city stacks big stories on those shoulders and finds new ways of telling them, from the revitalised Chicago River to its distinct and dynamic neighbourhoods. **CHICAGO P.134**



Laura Holt

Sicily's capital remains as riotous as ever. I spent much of my time stopping by markets, in search of the city's fabled street food. Giant *arancina* balls were a highlight; spleen sandwiches, however, were something of an acquired taste. **PALERMO P.144**



Lydia Bell

Trump's latest moves to undermine Cuba include an insistence that any visiting American must do a 'people-to-people' exchange. What's that you ask? It's actually the most interesting and enriching way for any visitor to see Havana. **CUBA P.162**

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***National Geographic Traveller* (UK)** is published by APL Media Limited, Unit 310, Highgate Studios, 53-79 Highgate Road, London NW5 1TL
natgeotraveller.co.uk
Editorial T: 020 7253 9906. *editorial@natgeotraveller.co.uk*
Sales/Admin T: 020 7253 9909. F: 020 7253 9907. *sales@natgeotraveller.co.uk*
Subscriptions T: 01293 312 166. *natgeotraveller@subscriptionhelpline.co.uk*

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120484J



Editor's letter

Winter is coming. Well, what passes for winter in the UK — a handful of frosty days amid months of mild, soggy dreariness.

If you want a proper winter — snow and all — you've got to go abroad. And while many people travel to escape the cold, facing the elements the way many other cultures have done for centuries is as life-affirming as an experience can be.

Pulling on some proper thermal layers and tackling ice, snow and face-tingling temperatures is a natural adrenalin rush. Whether it's a traditional ski trip, tackling a glacier, embracing the Nordic way of life, or pursuing any other of the multitude of modern ice adventures available, there's really nothing like a taste of the cold.

In this issue, we cover some of the world's most exhilarating sub-zero experiences, from snowmobiling through Norway's far north to being pulled along on skis by a horse (skijoring) in Switzerland; from staying a night in Sweden's Icehotel to hurtling downhill in Chile on skis.

Whether you want to get out there and face Mother Nature, or whether you'd rather embrace mulled wine and a roaring fire, there's definitely something about winter. Even if it never really arrives on our shores.

PAT RIDDELL, EDITOR

@patriddell
@patriddell

HIGHLIGHTS



Competitions

Check out our competitions for the chance to win a whole host of prizes. There's a full list online at *natgeotraveller.co.uk/competitions*



Travel Geeks: The Silk Road

Discover the best of the Silk Road and how to tackle it at our next Travel Geeks event on 12 December. *natgeotraveller.co.uk/events*



Photography Competition 2018

Your chance to make your mark — enter one of the most prestigious photography competitions around. See p.14

AWARD-WINNING NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC TRAVELLER

Travel Media Awards 2017: National Consumer Feature of the Year • ATTA Media Awards 2017: Best Cultural Article on an African Destination, Best Blogger on Africa & Best Online Coverage on Africa • British Guild of Travel Writers Awards 2016: Best Travel Writer • LATA Media Awards 2016: Online Blog Feature of the Year • British Travel Awards 2015: Best Consumer Holiday Magazine • British Annual Canada Travel Awards 2015: Best Canada Media Coverage • British Travel Awards 2014: Best Consumer Holiday Magazine • British Guild of Travel Writers Awards 2013: Best Overseas Feature • British Travel Press Awards 2012: Young Travel Writer of the Year

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IMAGE: TATRA PHOTOGRAPHY

Our annual Photography Competition is now open

Whether you're a professional or an amateur, this is the competition for you. Enter your preferred category — single shot, portfolio or video — and you'll be in with a chance of winning a commission.

Single shot: Upload a photograph in one of four different themes: Action, Nature, People, Urban





Portfolio: Professional photographers — upload four shots based on the same subject or theme





Video: Send us your YouTube/Vimeo link to an edited clip up to a maximum of two minutes

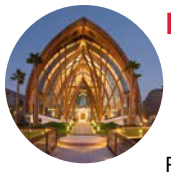
The prizes



GRAND PRIZE WINNER

Photography trip to the Carpathian Mountains

Win a six-night wildlife photography adventure with Tatra Photography. Wildlife photography tutor Ben Hall will provide tutorials and feedback. Lenses for Hire will also provide free 300mm-500mm lenses for the workshop. *lensesforhire.co.uk tatraphotographyworkshop.com*



PORTFOLIO WINNER

Twin-centre trip to Qatar

Three nights at Souq Waqif Boutique Hotels, B&B, and three nights at Banana Island Resort Doha by Anantara, B&B for two. Also included is a boat to and from Banana Island and flights with Qatar Airways. *visitqatar.qa qatarairways.com souqwaqifresort.com doha.anantara.com*



SINGLE SHOT & VIDEO

Billingham camera bag

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ANDY SKILLEN is a multi-award-winning wildlife photographer, who leads photography tours.



TEAGAN CUNNIFFE is a travel photographer with a strong interest in environmental issues.



NEIL FREEMAN shares expertise from his role as training manager at the Nikon School.



BEN HAWKINS is group editor of *Practical Photography*. He's been a photojournalist for over 16 years.





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SNAPSHOT

Paul Harnden, Brighton

I shot English shoe designer Paul Harnden at his studio in Brighton for the Italian interiors magazine *Case da Abitare* some years ago. Harnden was once described by fellow fashion luminary John Galliano as "very Greta Garbo" for his purposeful, discreet existence, typically avoiding the media. I found his workshop to be an aesthetic marvel — even the leather trimmings were beautifully composed. His handmade footwear, lining the shelves, is inspired by Amish traditions, the American Civil War and pre-industrial society, but his creations really take on a life of their own. **EMILY MOTT // PHOTOGRAPHER**

emilymott.com



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Editors' picks

We've been here and we've been there, and our team have found a few things we thought we'd share

DON PABLO

WHAT? Casa Malca **WHERE?** Tulum, Mexico **WHY?** We all know Pablo Escobar, right? Colombian drug lord? Subject of Netflix's *Narcos*? Well, he had a house. A big one. After sitting empty for 14 years, it was turned into a 42-room luxury hotel full of paintings, sculpture and furniture from revered modern artists including Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring. *casamalca.com* **TAMSIN WRESSELL**

TOP 3 ALTERNATIVE WORKOUTS

1 **LAUGHTER THERAPY, INDIA:** Try SwaSwara Rejuvenation and Yoga, which includes breathing and holistic laughter exercises.

2 **FIT & FACE, ITALY:** Lefay Fusion Fitness' facial gymnastics offset years of tension.

3 **WARRIOR WORKOUT, VIETNAM:** Workouts featuring animal-style kung fu movements like 'crouching tiger' and 'lean leopard'. *healthandfitnesstravel.com* **MARIA PIERI**

Go postal

First-class action at London's Postal Museum: its first temporary exhibition, *Writing Home — Letters as a Lifeline* (until 21 January) looks at the power of the post to connect people across the world, via stories from loved ones writing home; and the Mail Rail lets visitors journey back in time under the museum, into the 100-year-old labyrinth of tunnels that comprise the Royal Mail's former engineering depot and sorting office. Choo choo! *postalmuseum.org* **SARAH BARRELL**

IN NUMBERS

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100
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500
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40
Restaurants and cafes serving delicious Italian food

100,000
square metres to explore

FARIDA ZEYNALOVA



PARK LIFE

It's been 50 years since the Russian capital got a new park but the all-new Zaryadye makes up for lost time. The 32-acre space mirrors the country's four main geographic zones: tundra, steppe, forest and wetlands. There's even an ice cave.

JOSEPHINE PRICE



WHERE WE'RE GOING THIS CHRISTMAS...

Wales // **PAT RIDDELL**
New York // **STEPHANIE CAVAGNARO**
Slovenia // **AMELIA DUGGAN**
Andaman Islands // **JOSEPHINE PRICE**



IMAGES: GETTY

BIG PICTURE

AOP Awards 2017

In its 34th year, the Association of Photographers Awards is the image-making industry's very own Oscars. A finalist in the 'Life' category, Simon Winnall spoke about capturing this image. "While working in Cape Town last December, I started shooting a personal series of images depicting sports people. I was drawn to the pool at Sea Point; I found the construction of the boards, framed by the sky and sea, enchanting. With my local production team, I cast a diver and shot early one morning, before the heat of the day drew crowds. I'd always envisioned the image as black and white, focusing the eye on the clean, graphic construction of the boards and the taught, meticulous form of the diver's body suspended in flight." **SIMON WINNALL // PHOTOGRAPHER**

the-aop.org





IMAGE: SIMON WINNALL

NEW TOURS

Off the grid



With ready-made itineraries and travel planning apps, it's a doddle to get away these days. But how easy is it to really escape?

Forgo itineraries and well-trodden routes — a new travel service by Black Tomato challenges the way we explore the world. Striving to distance travellers from quotidian routines, the Get Lost experience provides a unique opportunity for a bona fide adventure. You choose the environment, rather than the destination: polar, jungle, desert, coastal or mountain. After any necessary destination-specific training, you'll be transported to a start point, given instructions and — though you'll be watched from afar by a support team — you're on your own. The challenge is to get through the wilderness to the final destination — a rare feat in our hyper-connected world. Plot your path between checkpoints and lurch yourself out of your comfort zone by exploring the company's tailored selection of unfettered landscapes. *blacktomato.com/get-lost* **JOSEPHINE PRICE**

BUT HOW?
Geo-mapping startup what3words has divided the world into a vast grid of nine-square-metre plots and given each a three-word address so you can navigate your Get Lost experience minus lengthy GPS coordinates.

GET LOST IN MONGOLIA...

- Off road in the Altai, Mongolia's highest mountain range
- Ride a Mongolian horse to the Potanin Glacier
- Raft down the Altai's largest river
- Hunt with a Kazakh eagle hunter



Beyond borders
Head to the Balkans for less-trodden, border-crossing trails that will take you to the once-disputed borderlands between Montenegro, Kosovo and Albania — now a designated Peace Park. A new six-day escapade by KE Adventure Travel traces a 33-mile trail that weaves its way between the three countries. *keadventure.com*

TOP FOUR

Least stressful cities

1 Stuttgart, Germany
2 Luxembourg, Luxembourg
3 Hannover, Germany
4 Bern, Switzerland *





IMAGES: GETTY; ALAMY. *SOURCE: STUDY BY ZIPJET



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IMAGE: CHRIS TONNESEN

Future of food

BUG GRUB

With a top chef in Bangkok dishing up insects, could this eco-friendly protein become a fine-dining norm?

The concept of eating insects isn't exactly revolutionary in Thailand — or in 80% of the world's countries. Crawlies were caught from crops before trickling to big city markets — like Khao San Road in Bangkok, where tourists crunch on heavily salted, deep-fried bugs. But insects are going up in the fine-dining world, too, and Chef Mai Thitiwat is taking the food source to a new level.

Based in ChangChui creative complex — a bazaar of galleries, restaurants and bars in Bangkok — Insects in the Backyard is the country's first fine-dining restaurant to eschew the deep fryer when it comes to bugs. Ravioli are filled with crab and water beetle meat; a beurre blanc sauce is infused with ant eggs for an acidic kick; and tiramisu is garnished with cocoa-dusted silkworms.

It's all part of Thitiwat's attempt to show value in what is usually overlooked. The benefits — health and environmental — are nothing to turn your nose up at. Insects are packed with protein, minerals and healthy fats, and if half of meat consumption was swapped with mealworm grubs and crickets, farmland could reduce by a third, according to a N8 Research Partnership study, cutting down on greenhouse gases emissions.

Other restaurants experimenting with crawly cuisine include Noma in Copenhagen (re-opening in a new location this January) and DOM in Sao Paulo. **TAMSIN WRESSELL**



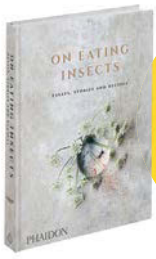


TRY THIS

ANTY GIN & TONIC

Ice cubes
2 parts Anty Gin (containing essence of red wood ant)
3 parts high-quality tonic water
Dried whole cochineal insect, to decorate (optional)
1 drop of carmine (liquid cochineal), per glass

Half-fill a tumbler or highball glass with ice cubes, add the gin, carmine and tonic water. Stir lightly, decorate with dried whole cochineal, if using, and serve.



Find this recipe and more in On Eating Insects. *phaidon.com*

THREE TO TRY

Bugging out

GRUB KITCHEN, PEMBROKESHIRE

Britain's first insect-themed restaurant is based on a working farm in Wales, dishing up the likes of mixed bug wellington for your Sunday lunch. *grubkitchen.co.uk*

TOLOACHE, NEW YORK CITY

Head to this Mexican restaurant with branches in Midtown, Downtown and the Upper East Side for a plate of Oaxacan-style grasshopper tacos. *toloachenyc.com*

LE FESTIN NU, PARIS

Mealworms and crickets are served as bar snacks at this bistro in Montmartre alongside insect-free options and a list of beers, wines and cocktails. *lefestinnu.com*



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Walk the line

A new trail across the Deep South takes in historic landmarks of the American Civil Rights Movement

This January, it's 155 years since President Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation freed slaves in the American South. With the debate over southern history raging on with the removal of Confederate monuments (see p.157), a new trail launching this month focuses on some 80 famous, infamous and lesser-known Civil Rights-era landmarks from the 1950s and '60s across Alabama, Georgia, North Carolina and Mississippi. *visittheusa.co.uk*

SARAH BARRELL



WOOLWORTH'S STORE
Where four black college students occupied seats at a 'whites only' lunch counter in 1960, launching a sit-in protest against segregation laws.



THE MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE
At the birthplace of MLK, hear the civil rights leader's voice in the parish church where he first spoke out against segregation.

Greensboro, North Carolina

Birmingham, Alabama

Atlanta, Georgia

Jackson, Mississippi

Selma, Alabama

Montgomery, Alabama

ART MOVEMENT
The Tate Modern's hit exhibition, *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power*, tours to Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Arkansas (3 February-23 April 2018); and Brooklyn Museum (7 Sept 2018- 3 Feb 2019).



NEW CIVIL RIGHTS MUSEUMS
This month, the opening of the Mississippi Civil Rights Museum and Museum of Mississippi History unveils challenging artefacts that aim to tell the complex history of this southern state.



EDMUND PETTUS BRIDGE
Where some 600 voters' rights protesters were attacked by state police on a bridge in Selma, during the Selma to Montgomery protest marches of 1965; later known as 'Bloody Sunday'.



PARSONAGE
Martin Luther King, Jr. lived here with his young family from 1954-1960 at the beginning of his quest for civil rights. It's also home to photographs of his wedding to Coretta Scott King.



THE 16TH STREET BAPTIST CHURCH
The church was bombed by Klansmen in 1963, killing four girls and injuring others. Three Ku Klux Klan members were eventually jailed for their part in the attack.

IMAGES: GETTY

Martial arts FOR KICKS

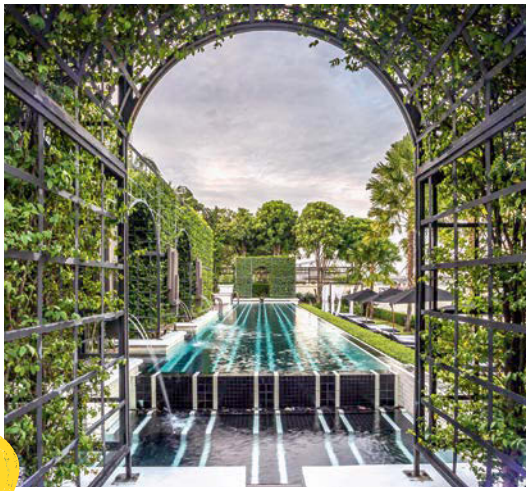
From self-defence to the art of Capoeira, why not fly off to try something new?



MARS ATTACKS
The term martial art means the art of war, and comes from the Roman god of war, Mars

Best ringside buzz
MUAY THAI, THAILAND

Bangkok hotel The Siam has its own ring and Muay Thai package, while many operators such as Audley Travel incorporate ringside seats at Bangkok's Rajadamnern Boxing Stadium. A 14-day Classic Thailand tour costs from £2,630 per person including flights, accommodation, transfers and a Muay Thai experience. *audleytravel.com thesiamhotelcom*



Best non-combat
CAPOEIRA, BRAZIL

A martial art for anyone who doesn't like contact, capoeira is an acrobatic movement that combines kicks, spins, cartwheels and handstands. Real World Holidays offers a number of Capoeira experiences priced from £20 for an open class or a private one-hour class from £180 per person. *realworldholidays.co.uk*



Best for self-defence
KRAV MAGA, ISRAEL

A hand-to-hand combat system used by the Israeli military, Krav Maga is designed to prevent, deal and overcome all kinds of violence and attacks. Using a combination of techniques from various martial arts, it's used for self-defence, with a philosophy that the best way to win a fight is not to get into one in the first place. Anyone keen to learn self-defence can book an intensive 10-day course from €1,495 (£1,340). *krav-maga.com/touring-israel*

Best offbeat
JIU JITSU, UK

Instructor Nick Tiscoe has launched a series of SurfJitsu camps and packages combining classes in the grappling martial art at his Brazilian Jiu Jitsu academy in Newquay and surf lessons at a school down the road in Mawgan Porth, Cornwall. There's a close relationship between the two sports with many jiu jitsu fighters also avid surfers. Prices from £120 for two surf sessions and a week's worth of training. *northshorebjjsurfcamp.co.uk*

230
The estimated number of calories you'll burn in 20 minutes of intense martial arts training

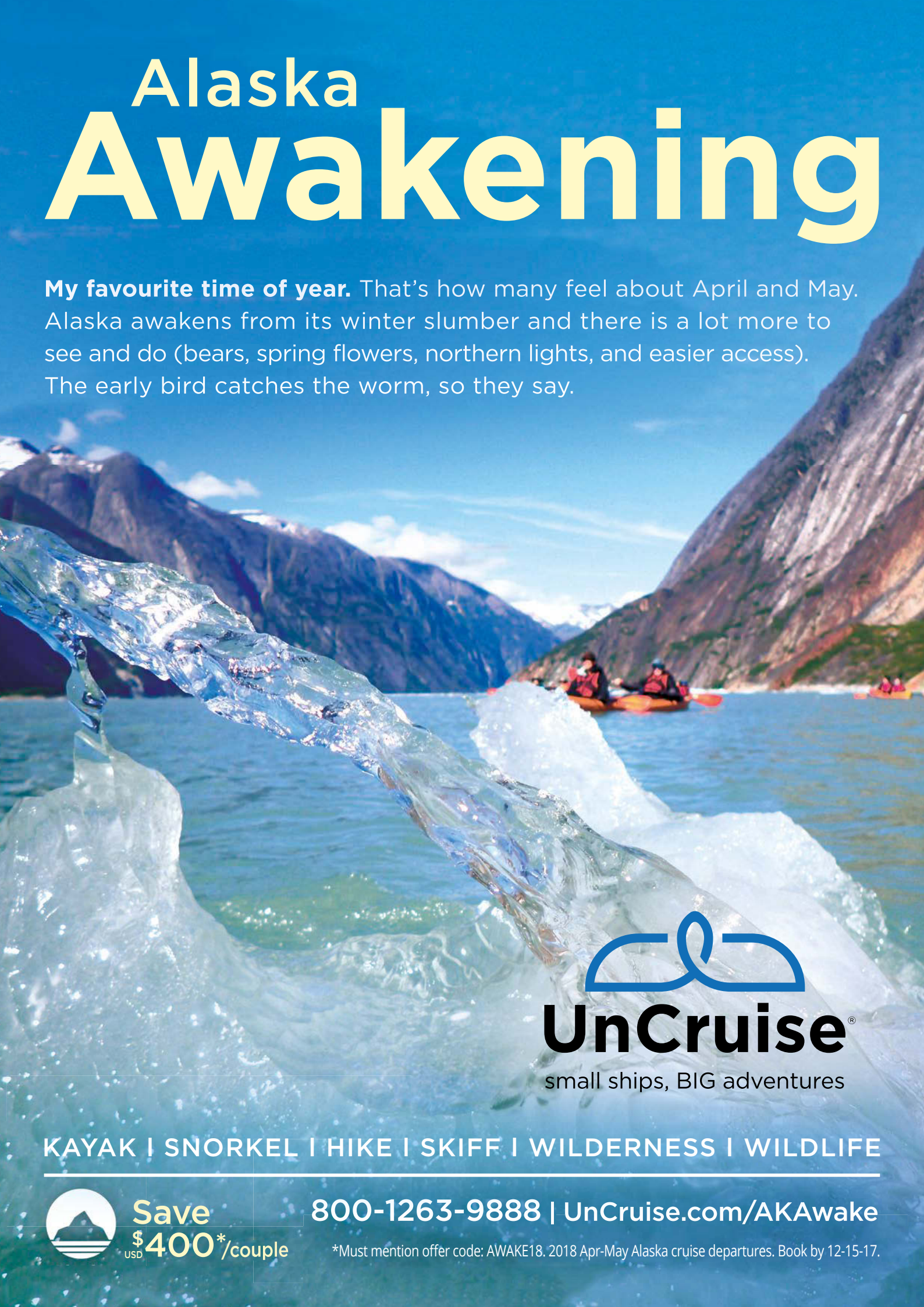


Best for immersive culture
KARATE, SUMO AND NINJA, JAPAN

The origins of karate date back to when the Japanese invaded Okinawa and confiscated weapons, causing people to rely on their hands as defence. JTB can arrange daily training at a local dojo (school) with a master of karate. A tailormade seven-night trip costs around £700, which includes accommodation in Okinawa and daily training. *japanspecialist.co.uk*

SAM LEWIS

IMAGES: THE SIAM HOTEL; ALAMY; GETTY


Alaska
Awakening
My favourite time of year. That's how many feel about April and May. Alaska awakens from its winter slumber and there is a lot more to see and do (bears, spring flowers, northern lights, and easier access). The early bird catches the worm, so they say.
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HUNGARIAN WINE
Raise a glass

Hungary is undergoing a viticultural revival with everything from dry whites and dessert wines to 'bull's blood' red on the menu

Since the Magyars conquered this region a thousand years ago, viticulture has been taken very seriously — no surprise given that Hungary has two native grapes suited to making complex white wines. Despite that tradition, the tumult of the 21st century saw winemaking all but wiped out. During the communist era, the focus was on quantity, not quality, and Hungarian wine disappeared from shelves. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, however, there's been a revival — youngsters relearning the skills of their great-great-grandfathers. With the reputation of the nation's wine improving every year, connoisseurs are coming back to what's being called the 'new old world wine'.

The vineyard visit

Tokaj is famous for its ultra-sweet dessert wines, but it's now making more dry whites, mostly with native grapes *furmint* and *hárslevelű*. Some locals are also experimenting with sparkling wines. Within a few miles of each other, vineyards around Mád range from the award-winning Szepsy to madcap garage production, which is high on creativity but low on consistency.

What to pair it with

The Tokaj region is so focused on white wine that restaurants such as Gusteau prepare tasting menus absent of red. In Budapest, things are more diverse. Michelin-starred Borkonyha Winekitchen has Hungarian wines of all colours like *bikavér* — a red that translates as 'bull's blood'.

How to do it

Wine holiday specialist SmoothRed offers The Hungarian Collection: Budapest and Tokaj, a new four-night trip that explores the vineyards of Hungary. From £1,889, including return flights and a Michelin-star dining experience. *smoothred.co.uk*

JAMIE LAFFERTY









GERGELY SOMOGYI
TOKAJ-BASED WINE EXPERT AND EDITOR OF *TOKAJ TODAY*

"The tiny quantities of terroir-driven wines — often made from unique, native grapes — that Hungary's centuries-old wine regions produce are destined to remain niche products. They're aimed at the discerning connoisseur for whom wine isn't only a beverage, but a vehicle for discovering the culture, history, and gastronomy of far-away places."

THREE TO TRY

SZEPSY
Take the white-knuckle option in Tokaj with an off-road 4x4 tour of the Szepsy vineyards, sampling wines right next to the vines. *szepsy.hu*

THUMMERER
To visit one of the country's best *bikavér* — 'bull's blood' red — wineries, check out Thummerer in the northern Eger region. *thummerer.hu*

HERNYAK ESTATE
Just a day trip from Budapest, the Etyek region has dozens of wineries. Try the Hernyak Estate, which has a restaurant and distillery on site. *hernyak.hu*

IMAGES: DISZNÓKÓ; ALAMY



Reykjanes Peninsula

Experience the breathtaking geological wonders of the tectonic plates boundaries drifting apart in Reykjanes UNESCO Global Geopark.

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ICELAND

STREET ART Hong Kong

Cameras at the ready — the animated streets of Hong Kong's Central district are home to some eye-popping street art
Words: Connor McGovern

1 RUKKIT'S FOX

Kick-start your arty amble by taking in the kaleidoscopic fox on Upper Station Street, painted by Thai artist Rukkit Kuanhawate. A dazzling example of his signature geometric style, the multi-coloured vulpine is one of the city's most eye-catching pieces of street art.

2 TANK LANE STEPS

Squeezed between Hollywood Road and Square Street is an easily missed flight of steps — look out for the portrait of a futuristic woman, whose intense stare challenges anyone entering the passageway. At the top, local legend Bruce Lee bursts out of a wall of painted tiles, created by Korean artist Xeva.

3 SEOUL BROS

Head up the street to buzzing Korean kitchen Seoul Bros, a spot once shared by French restaurant La Grande Bouffe. As a nod to the mix of Eastern and Western cuisines, street artist Eric Renaud turned a wall into a monochrome mural, depicting a Parisian cafe scene populated by chic Korean patrons and framed images of bamboo.



4 HOLLYWOOD TRIBUTE

It's hard to miss the huge smiles on the front of the Madera Hollywood hotel, on Hollywood Road. Painted by Rob Sketcherman, the city's largest mural is a celebration of some of Tinseltown's most iconic names — from a 35ft-high Charlie Chaplin in blue and yellow to a pretty-in-pink Marilyn Monroe.

5 WALLED CITY MURAL

At the junction of Hollywood Road and Graham Street is one of the city's most-snapped artworks — Alex Croft's tribute to Kowloon Walled City's iconic skyline snaking up the street. Before it was demolished in 1994, the ramshackle block of high-rise tenements was one of the most densely populated — and most lawless — places on Earth.

6 BROOKLYN BAR & GRILL

One side of this all-American eatery on Graham Street is adorned with swirling, art nouveau-style shapes. It's the work of English expat artist Malcolm Golding and pops with multicoloured architectural motifs — a homage to the vibrant decor inside.

discoverhongkong.com/uk
hkwalls.com

ILLUSTRATION: TILLY RUNNINGFORCRAYONS.CO.UK



WHERE TO STAY

Genoa

The Italian port city and its surroundings offer a smattering of stunning sleeping dens — from a hand-built farmhouse to a palazzo penthouse

1 RELAIS DEL MARO
Known as an *albergo diffuso* or 'scattered hotel' — a cross between apartments and a B&B — Relais del Maro's accommodation is split between three buildings in the hamlet of Borgomaro, about 60 miles southwest of Genoa. Guests have access to a communal garden and pool. Doubles from £69, B&B. *relaisdelmaro.it*

2 LA SOSTA DI OTTONE III
A restaurant with six rooms and magical Mediterranean views, open from April to October, La Sosta is a modern *locanda* (inn) perched inland from the Cinque Terre National Park. Rooms are bright and colourful, while the restaurant menu is focused on local produce. Doubles from £204, B&B. *lasosta.com*





3 AGRITURISMO IL FILO DI PAGLIA
An organic farm in the hills behind Sestri Levante where the Azaghi family produce their own meat, cheese and veg, serve biodynamic wine, and offer reiki and tui na massage. And the farmhouse was hand-built using straw bales, local soil and vegetable soap. Doubles from £55, B&B. *agriturismoilfilodipaglia.it*

4 VECCHIA GENOVA
There are B&Bs and then there's this pad on the top floor of a 16th-century palazzo just off Genoa's main Renaissance drag. Three rooms, each with their own bathroom, pair period features with memory-foam mattresses, handmade soaps and an organic breakfast spread. Doubles from £93, B&B. *vecchiagenova.com*

JULIA BUCKLEY





Enjoy the height of Roman life

THE VIEW FROM THE TERRACE OF THE POPOLO SUITE
AT HOTEL DE RUSSIE, ROME

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ROCCOFORTEHOTELS.COM

MEET SANTA CLAUS

Poles apart

Is it too late to book a Finnish Father Christmas experience? We mull over where to go and the best time to do it





FATHER CHRISTMAS LIVES IN A LOT OF PLACES. Best known is Rovaniemi in Finland, which has its own SantaPark. It's a tad commercial, so consider the ski resort Levi or Ranua. You could even combine a stay at the SnowCastle of Kemi, which is close to Rovaniemi.

LOOK FOR A SPECIALIST TOUR OPERATOR. They can arrange a private meeting with Father Christmas as well as treats such as sleigh rides and husky sledding. I took the kids, then aged five and seven, to Ranua, where we met Santa in a remote hut in the forest. Operators include Inghams, Nordic Experience, Canterbury Travel and Transun.

AT WHAT AGE SHOULD I TAKE THE KIDS? Any age. Ideally while they still believe in Christmas and Santa.

IT'S NOT CHEAP, BUT IT'S WORTH IT. The closer to Christmas, the higher the price — upwards of £2,200 for a family of four, for two to three nights. Activities Abroad has three nights at Harriniva Wilderness Hotel (15-18 December), which includes a private meeting with Santa, from £1,455 for an adult and £1,125 for a child aged 4-12 years, flights included. *activitiesabroad.com*

IS IT TOO LATE? Probably, in terms of availability, but why not book ahead for 2018? There are domestic versions such as Lapland UK, in the Whitmoor Forest, Ascot, from £75 per person. *laplanduk.co.uk* **MARIA PIERI**



FIVE TO TRY

Winter wonderland

SOMERSET HOUSE, LONDON

This year, ice skating will be accompanied by Fortnum's food, drink and shopping as well as a 40ft tree. Until 14 January. *somersethouse.org.uk*

ROYAL PAVILION, BRIGHTON

The former royal palace has penguin skate aids for learners and a safe area for younger skaters. Until 14 January. *royalpavilionicerink.co.uk*

MANCHESTER ICE RINK

The London Road Fire Station is transformed into a winter wonderland in the run-up to Christmas for the Winter Gathering festival. *manchestericerink.co.uk*

ST ANDREW SQUARE, EDINBURGH

Glide around the Melville Monument on this circular ice rink. There are skating aids available — and a bar. Until 6 January. *edinburghschristmas.com*

EDEN PROJECT, CORNWALL

Tie in your visit to the botanical biomes with a skating session. There are parent and toddler ice-play session as well as some for kids aged six to 12 and above. Until 18 February. *edenproject.com*



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FIVE TO TRY

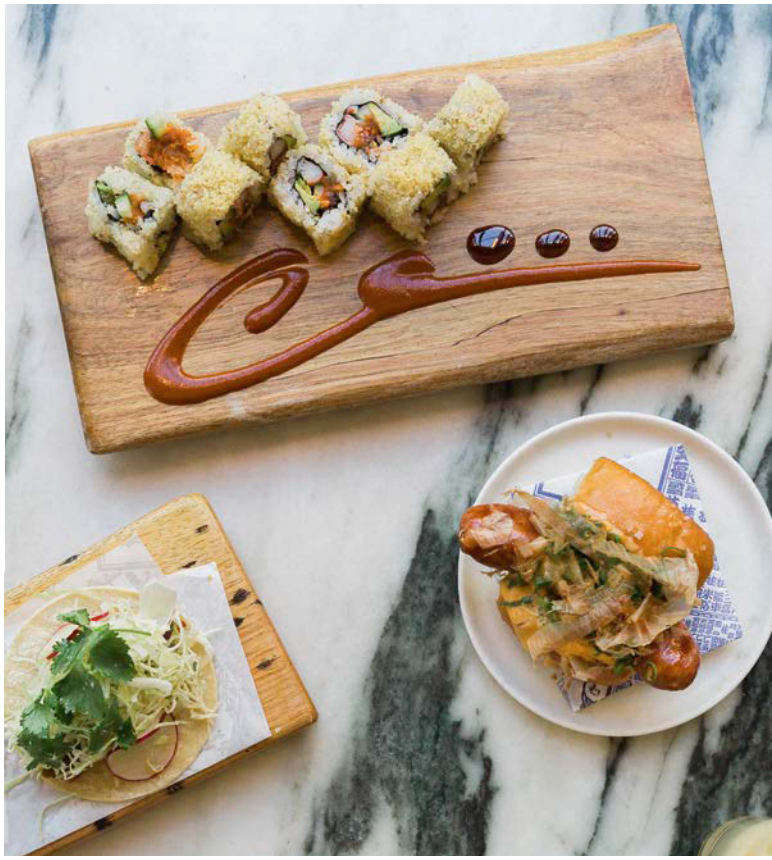
My Dallas

From authentic Mexican to creative craft cocktails, Dallas's food and drink scene nods to international influences but remains distinctly Texan



1 TOP KNOT

Hip yet laid back, the light-filled Top Knot is a great place to spend an evening. It boasts a really creative pan-Asian menu with small plates ranging from sushi to bao. Sharing dishes include crispy chicken katsu with miso mustard or charred cauliflower with farro and creme fraiche. And best of all, it offers sake on tap. *topknotdallas.com*





DR NICOLE R MYERS oversees the Dallas Museum of Art's European collection from the medieval period up to 1945. Before joining the DMA, Myers worked at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. *dma.org*

2 ATWATER ALLEY

Located in an alley with an unmarked door, this secret bar serves up some of the best craft cocktails in Dallas. Both floors boast bars stocked with an impressive array of fresh ingredients and garnishes. I love to tell the bartenders what spirit I'm in the mood for and let them choose what drink to make. *atwateralley.com*

3 MESO MAYA

Meso Maya is a local favourite for authentic Mexican food. Located within walking distance of the Dallas Arts District and other popular attractions, its downtown location has a great outdoor patio space. I recommend making reservations in advance so you can skip the line and get straight to the food. *mesomaya.com*

4 VICTOR TANGOS

With its cool, low-key vibe, excellent food, and creative cocktails, Victor Tangos is one of my favourite restaurants in Dallas. The menu is always changing and the plates — like ahi tuna nachos or burrata with sweet and sour aubergine — are sized for sharing, making it a fun place to go with friends. *victortangos.com*

5 CHICKEN SCRATCH/THE FOUNDRY

For me, Chicken Scratch and The Foundry represent what I love about Texas. There is nothing better than ordering drinks and fried chicken from their huge shared outdoor patio. Filled with picnic tables and a stage that features live music, it's the perfect place for a casual night out. *cs-tf.com*


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STAY AT HOME

Lavenham

Real ale, timber-framed homes, crackling fires... this sleepy Suffolk town is a countryside charmer

DON'T MISS
Presiding over the Market Square is the beautiful timber-framed Lavenham Guildhall. Head inside for exhibitions on the building's fascinating past, from its role in the town's cloth industry to its dark times as an 18th-century workhouse. *nationaltrust.org.uk*



Where to eat

Join the locals at The Angel, where there's real ale on draught, a varied specials board and country pub classics gracing the tables. *theangellavenham.co.uk*



We like
Amanda turned the ground floor of her house into Lavenham Blue Vintage Tea Rooms and we love her for it. This popular pit stop is delightfully chintzy and crammed with delicious cakes. Try the scones, baked by Amanda's mum, Margaret. *facebook.com/lavenhamblue*

Where to stay
Packed with original features, The Swan at Lavenham is the ultimate bucolic bolthole. An elegant spa, cosy fireside nooks and characterful bedrooms are perfect for unwinding, but be sure to book a table for dinner at the chic Gallery Restaurant, which has an excellent wine list to match dishes like spring lamb with wild garlic, asparagus and charlotte potatoes. *theswanatlavenham.co.uk*



What to do
A short drive away is Long Melford, home to the red-bricked beauty of Melford Hall, a fine 16th-century mansion. It was frequently visited by family friend Beatrix Potter, who painted in the grounds. Also, just up the road is the moated Kentwell Hall, with a lively calendar of events and re-enactments. *nationaltrust.org.uk*
kentwell.co.uk

CONNOR MCGOVERN

IMAGES: GETTY; ALAMY



UNIQUE VISION

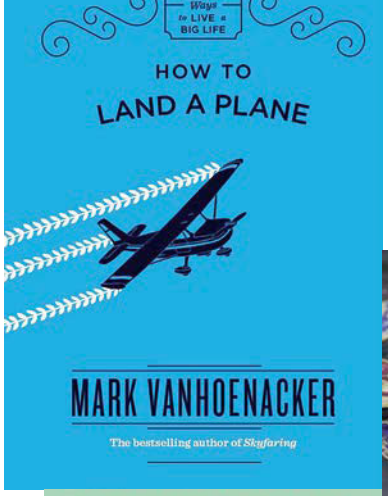
Moments at the Museum

THE EINAR JÓNSSON MUSEUM

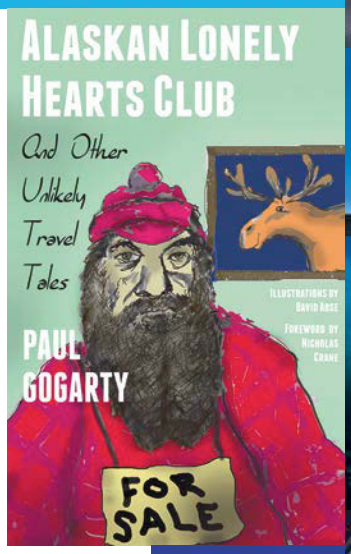
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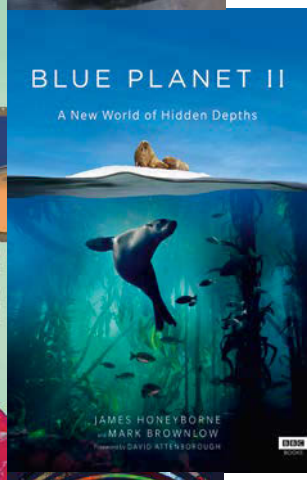
The Word

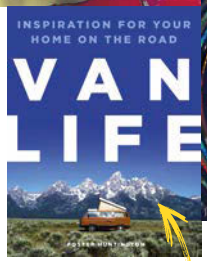
ALL I WANT FOR CHRISTMAS IS...







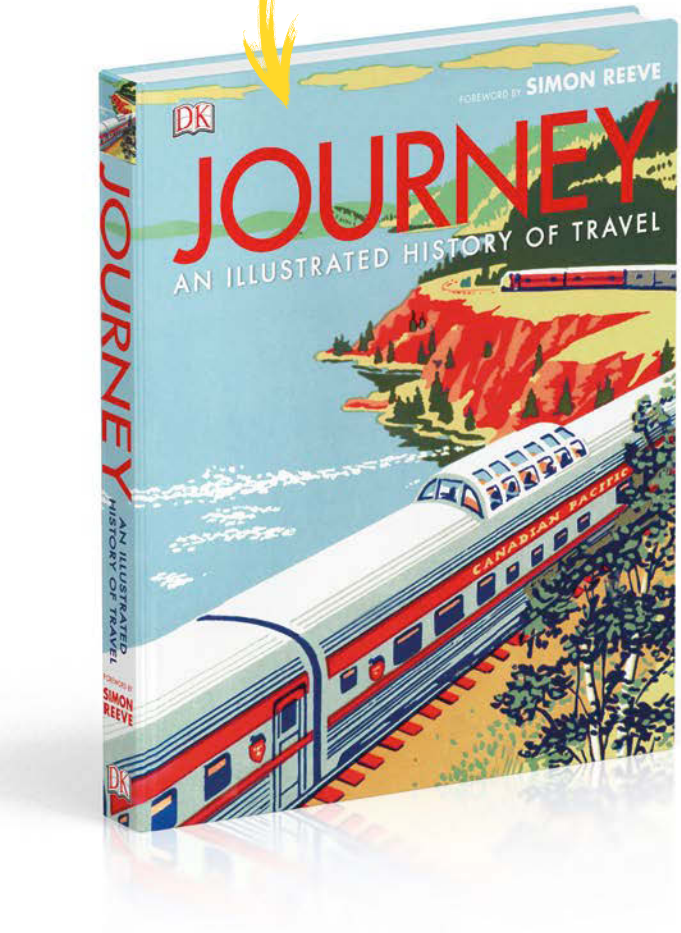






Journey: An Illustrated History of Travel

Why do we roam? How — and where — did we first holiday? What motivates great explorers, from Columbus and Hiram Bingham to Roy 'Indiana Jones' Chapman Andrews? These and even more ambitious questions are addressed in this lively, visual account of travel and discovery, charting how our worldwide wanderings have changed over the centuries. With a foreword from travel broadcasting royalty, Simon Reeve, and packed with the kind of glorious photographs, illustrations and historic maps you'd expect from DK, this is a very pretty Christmas prezzie indeed. RRP: £25 (Dorling Kindersley)



HOW TO LAND A PLANE

Anyone who read Mark Vanhoenacker's unlikely 2015 bestseller, *Skyfaring*, will know that his newest offering is a work of humorous and outright poetic travel geekery. Learn about 'pitch' and 'yaw', but also get a spirit-lifting picture of cloud formations and sunsets as painted by the lyrical pilot. RRP: £9.99 (Quercus)

MEXICO: A CULINARY QUEST

A quest to find the heart and soul of this vast country and its people through the medium of food takes writer and documentary filmmaker Hossein Amirsadeghi through Mexico's most picturesque states. With no real recipes but plenty of frontline travelogue, he offers vivid flavours, images and tales from the road. RRP: £45 (Thames & Hudson / TransGlobe Publishing)

UNIVERSE: EXPLORING THE ASTRONOMICAL WORLD

Head out on a stargazing trip through the centuries with 300 images that combine and contrast scientific discovery and artistic wonder at our galaxy and its gaseous, sparkling, combustible contents, both discovered and imagined. RRP: £39.95 (Phaidon)

VAN LIFE: INSPIRATION FOR YOUR HOME ON THE ROAD

The best of Foster Huntingdon's world-travelling Instagram account (*#vanlife*) is now transformed into glossy print, offering a window into a community of road-trippers that's both retro and faintly ridiculous, but also makes us want to get behind the wheel. RRP: £16.99 (Little Brown)

BLUE PLANET II

The glossy book accompaniment to the hit BBC series serves up 200 photographs and stills from the BBC Natural History Unit's pioneering footage. Each chapter is dedicated to diving into a different oceanic habitat with behind-the-scenes tales from producers, James Honeyborne and Mark Brownlow. RRP: £25 (BBC Books)

ALASKAN LONELY HEARTS CLUB

Travel the globe in an A-Z of stories peopled by some of the planet's most eccentric characters, as told by travel journalist and TV presenter, Paul Gogarty. There are few writers so attuned to finding and telling a travel tale from the unexpected. RRP: £9.99 (Signal Books) **SARAH BARRELL**


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Win





WIN A NINE-NIGHT LUXURY TRIP TO MALAYSIA

***National Geographic Traveller* (UK) has teamed up with Mandarin Oriental, Four Seasons and Malaysia Airlines to offer a nine-night trip to Kuala Lumpur and Langkawi**

BY AIR
Travel in style to Langkawi with a stopover in Kuala Lumpur with Malaysia Airlines. In business class, you can relax on spacious seats that transform into lie-flat beds, check in a generous 40kg of baggage and be treated to unrivalled hospitality from the cabin crew. *malaysiaairlines.com*

THE PRIZE
One winner and a guest will receive return business-class flights from Heathrow to Langkawi, including a stopover in Kuala Lumpur, with Malaysia Airlines; four nights at Mandarin Oriental, Kuala Lumpur in a new Club Twin Towers View Room with a Tropical Rainforest Spa Journey for two; and a further five nights at Four Seasons Resort Langkawi in a Garden View Ground Floor Pavilion with breakfast, a 60-minute Couple Geo Signature Massage and a Mangrove & Eagles Safari.

TO ENTER

Answer the following question online at *natgeotraveller.co.uk/competitions*

WHAT IS THE CAPITAL OF MALAYSIA?

Competition closes on 31 December 2017. The winner must be 18 or over and the trip is subject to availability. Full T&Cs available at *natgeotraveller.co.uk*



IN THE CITY
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Join us for our next Travel Geeks: Rush Hour on 12 December where we'll be discussing the Silk Road with our panel of experts

Ancient caravanserai; bartering in bazaars; delicate cups of steaming tea served in ornate local china; and vast, open plains that sprawl beneath big skies — the mere mention of the Silk Road conjures some of travel's most evocative sights. Threading from the ports of the Mediterranean to the shores of the Far East, this iconic network of trails has tempted many to beat its path, from the original merchants who sought their fortunes to modern-day travellers inspired to live out their own adventure. Still one of the world's ultimate journeys, we get to grips with the Silk Road in this Travel Geeks session, with plenty of advice and tips from our panel of experts.

TIME: 18:00 to 19:00
WHERE: Wallacespace Covent Garden, 2 Dryden St, London WC2E 9NA
TICKETS: £10 (includes drinks and nibbles)

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THE PANEL



MODERATED BY FARIDA ZEYNALOVA
Farida is a contributing editor to *National Geographic Traveller* (UK) and will keep our panel in check while also adding her own tips



EMMA THOMSON
Regular contributor Emma clocked six countries and 7,000 miles on her Silk Road odyssey, featured in our April 2017 issue

MORE PANELLISTS TO BE ANNOUNCED

NATGEOTRAVELLER.CO.UK/EVENTS

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC TRAVELLER TRAVEL GEEKS Rush Hour

Keep an eye out...
From honing your camera skills to lively panel discussions on the latest travel trends, 2018 will be packed with more of our sell-out sessions to feed your travel bug. Look out for more details on the website: ***natgeotraveller.co.uk/events***

2 FEBRUARY 2018
TRAVEL GEEKS AT THE DESTINATIONS SHOW
Our ever-popular Travel Geeks return to the Destinations Show at Olympia London. Offering personal anecdotes, know-how and plenty of experience, our experts are on hand to give advice and inspiration to travellers hungry for their next adventure. Past sessions include Walking & Trekking, Adventure Travel and Food & Drink. Come with an open mind and plenty of questions.



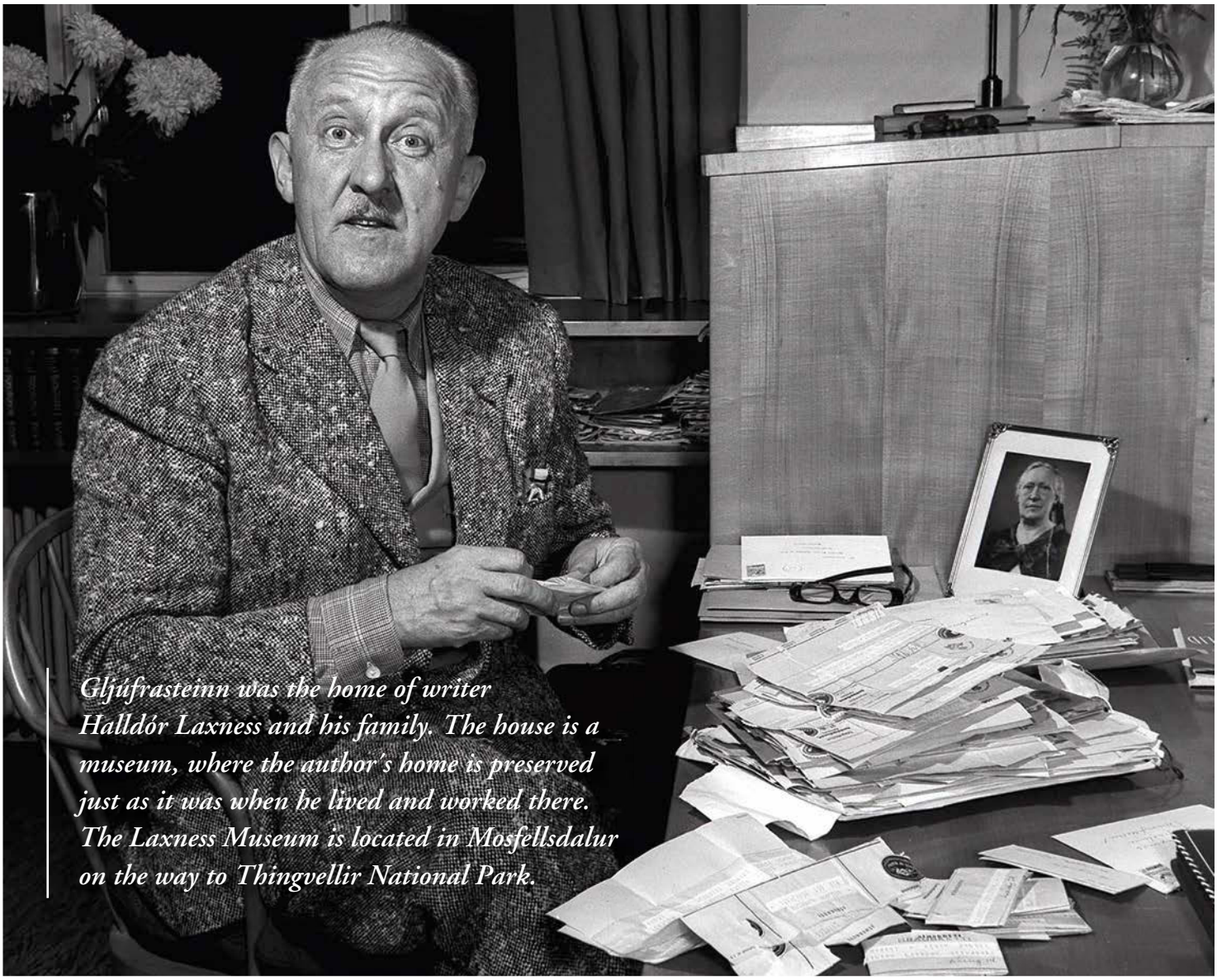
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LAXNESS MUSEUM

HALLDÓR LAXNESS (1902–1998)
NOBEL PRIZE IN LITERATURE 1955



Gljúfrasteinn was the home of writer Halldór Laxness and his family. The house is a museum, where the author's home is preserved just as it was when he lived and worked there. The Laxness Museum is located in Mosfellsdalur on the way to Thingvellir National Park.

GLJÚFRASTEINN

Laxness Museum

www.gljufrasteinn.is







A LOOK BACK AT

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC TRAVELLER

Festival



On 17 September, we welcomed over 500 people to our first festival, featuring talks, experiences and travel inspiration

DID YOU MISS IT?
The Festival will be back in 2018 with all new experiences and masterclasses! Watch this space *natgeotraveller.co.uk/festival*



Taiko drummers kick-started the day with ground-shaking beats, energising the crowd for the morning's main event: man of adventure, Benedict Allen. He took the audience on an edge-of-your-seat journey through his long career of solo exploration in far-flung corners of the world — from facing down death in the Amazon basin to a scarring ritual in deepest Papua New Guinea. The main stage later welcomed the star of *Britain's Best Walks*, television's Julia Bradbury, and Arctic exploration royalty, Paul Rose.





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You said

"Would I recommend the National Geographic Traveller Festival? Definitely! If you love travel and adventure, it's a fantastic day out. The venue was perfect and all your food and drink was included in the ticket price. The highlights of the day for me were the two masterclasses I attended — they were really useful and inspiring."

KATE, BLOGGER, *KATELOVESTRAVEL.NET*





You said

"Boy, did it go off with a bang! I really enjoyed how, throughout the day, I was transported to a different country within a few steps. It felt like the organisers had created a festival just for me. As the bartender handed me an Old Fashioned at the Monkey Shoulder after party, I realised I hadn't stopped smiling all day!"

HANNAH, BLOGGER, *HORIZONHOPPERS.COM*



Elsewhere in the Brewery, Festival-goers were having a go at flamenco, yoga, Taekwondo, mindfulness, wine tasting and bushcraft workshops, exploring China via virtual reality, or tucking into a Sicilian lunch buffet — washed down with Aperol Spritz. Expertise and inspiration was liberally dished out at the celebrity food demos, at our Travel Geeks panel talks, our tremendously popular Travel Writing and Photography Masterclasses, and in Babbel's foreign languages lab.

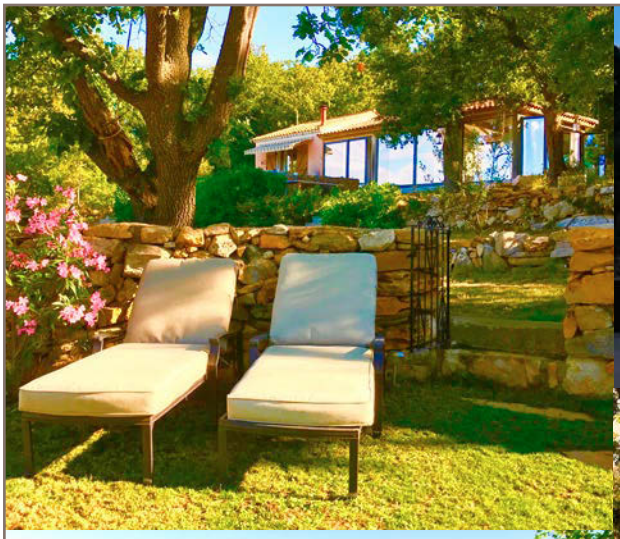
It was great to meet so many ardent travellers throughout the day and at the closing party. We can't wait to come back in 2018 with even more of what you loved from the event.
PAT RIDDELL, EDITOR

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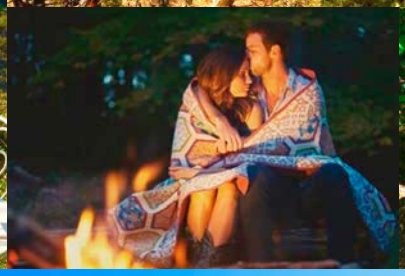
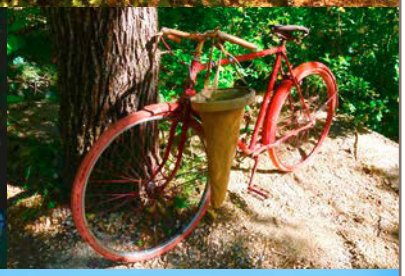
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NOTES FROM AN AUTHOR // ANDREW MAY

MARS

Is there life on Mars? For a new generation of privately-funded space exploration programmes, the red planet is the next frontier for exploration

I was 11 years old when Apollo 11 landed on the Moon in 1969. That's an impressionable age, and a blissfully uncynical one. Space exploration was the in-thing, notching up exciting new feats at a headlong pace, and it never crossed my mind that it might be just a passing fad. Like so many youngsters in those days, I was space mad; it was what drove me to specialise in physics at school and do astronomical research at university. And, like most people back then, I would've found it hard to believe that trips to Mars wouldn't be a routine occurrence in the year 2017.

It wasn't an unreasonable expectation. The same technology, and the same theory, that took Apollo to the Moon could — with a little modification — have taken people futher afield. Wernher von Braun, the brains behind the Apollo missions, worked out a detailed plan that would've done just that. He even pencilled in a landing date: 9 August 1982. The US government could've picked up von Braun's plan and run with it, but it chose instead to focus on Earth-orbital operations using the space shuttle.

Yet there are plenty of good reasons for going to Mars. It may not be the most hospitable planet in the Solar System — that's Earth, of course — but it comes a respectable second. Admittedly the air is thin and unbreathable, and it gets very, very cold at night — but it's warmer during the daytime, when the surface of Mars receives almost half as much sunlight as Earth. And the red planet has plenty of water, in the form of subsurface ice, as well as most of the other natural resources visitors would need to set up sustainable habitats.

Seen through the electronic eyes of NASA's Curiosity rover, Mars looks reassuringly Earth-like. In fact, it could be mistaken for one of the drier, more barren parts of our own planet. There are signs of wind and water erosion, with rounded pebbles, sand dunes, dried-up riverbeds — and relatively few Moon-like impact craters. Mars differs from the dead landscape of the Moon in another way, too — it's in full colour, not just shades of grey. The sand is orangey-brown, some of the rocks are distinctly bluish, and the sky is pale pink — with the occasional puffy white cloud.

ILLUSTRATION: JACQUI OAKLEY



When humans finally travel to Mars, it'll be in the same spirit of adventure that's seen us visit every corner of our own planet — that's not a job for a plodding government agency, but for a professional private company that understands the law of supply and demand

Mars ought to be the number one destination for any traveller venturing beyond Earth. Yet no human has visited its surface — only robotic probes like Curiosity and its predecessors. Why did it take just eight years to get from the first manned spaceflight to a Moon landing, and then another 48 years to get... well, nowhere, to put it bluntly? It all comes down to means and motive.

Until very recently, the only organisations with the means to get into space were government agencies like NASA — and from their point of view, there was just no motive for sending humans to Mars. NASA is fine when it comes to politically driven programmes like the Moon landings and the space shuttle, or unmanned science missions like the Curiosity rover. But, if you're focused on scientific and political achievements, why bother sending people all the way to the red planet? You can do the politics for less money closer to home, and the Mars science using robots, also for less cash.

But real Marsophiles don't want to go there to do science or to score political points. When humans finally travel to Mars, it'll be in the same spirit of exploration and adventure that's seen us visit every corner of our own planet. That's not a job for a plodding government agency, but for a slick and professional private company that understands the law of supply and demand. People will pay to go to Mars — if the price is right — for the same reason they'll pay to visit any other new and exciting destination. A mere decade ago, the idea of a private enterprise spaceflight was pure science fiction. Now, thanks to companies like Elon Musk's SpaceX, it's becoming a viable reality.

The future of space travel lies not with taxpayer-funded dinosaurs like NASA but with visionary companies like SpaceX and ordinary, fare-paying tourists like you and me. Travelling to Mars has been technologically possible for more than 30 years — all we have to do now is make it happen.

Destination Mars: The Story of Our Quest to Conquer the Red Planet by Andrew May is published by Icon Books. RRP: £7.99.

andrew-may.com

@drandrewmay

VIEW FROM THE USA // AARON MILLAR

PURPLE PATCH

A home can say a lot about a person — and Prince's Paisley Park is more than a match for his outrageous musical performances

Prince was the ultimate American rock star. Braggadocious, sparkly, outrageous: he embodied all that's brash and beautiful about celebrity in the States. He could back it up too: here's a man who out-funked James Brown, soloed with the spirit of Hendrix and made Madonna look like a fashion prude. He was the only person in the world who ever made me want to wear glitter; and the only one, surely, to make bottomless yellow onesies look cool (I drew the line at those).

But he was more than that too. Prince wasn't just a musician — he was the music itself: the embodiment of the beat, that moment on the dancefloor when, for just an instant, your ego dissolves, the world disappears and all that remains is the strut and sex and swagger of the tune. If you bottled the sound of American celebrity, Prince would be the noise that came out.

But now he's gone. On 21 April 2016, the Purple One passed away in the elevator of his wildly eccentric Minneapolis mansion, Paisley Park. Now open to the general public for tours, the house has been preserved exactly as he left it — which is to say, utterly mad. I came to pay homage.

First impressions are surprising. From the outside, the enormous 65,000sq ft complex looks more like a corporate headquarters than a pop star's crib: prefabricated white panelling, no windows, a soulless box on the edge of a busy motorway.

Inside it makes sense. The first thing I see is a giant mural of his immaculately eyelashed eyes beaming down from the entranceway — a burst of divine light shining down on us from within. There's another with a rainbow springing from his outstretched palm like a kitsch Michelangelo fresco. Lyrics, guitars, outfits and his image line every wall. Everything is purple, apart from the walls — painted like blue skies with fluffy clouds; there's even a room with actual doves in it that coo but don't cry. This isn't some museum display; this is how the man lived — in his own home. But then again: 100-million records, dozens of hit singles, an Oscar and probably the greatest male shoe collection in the history of the universe. If anyone can be forgiven a god complex, it's Prince.

As well as his living spaces (including a gold-tinted office, diner-style kitchen and an entire room decked out with UV stars like a glowing purple nebula), there are four recording studios, a Hollywood-style sound stage and his very own nightclub. I visit Studio B and play table tennis by the vocal booth where Sign o' the Times was put to record (legend has it he once humiliated his pop rival Michael Jackson in a ping pong match here). Studio A, meanwhile, is where Lovesexy was born and his last recorded work lies unfinished on the mixing desk — trademark funk, touches of jazz, but no vocals (he never got that far); their absence like his ghost drifting through the room.

I tour car collections, piano collections, awards, entire rooms filled with memorabilia from Graffiti Bridge and Purple Rain, like altars to his creativity. Each space has its own mood, a unique combination of colour and form, like a mosaic of himself, ostentatious and unapologetic. Prince lived as he performed; his home was a stage too.

At the end of the tour, I stay behind and watch a video of his 2007 Super Bowl performance of *Purple Rain*, widely regarded as the best half-time show in the history of the game. It's all there: a torrential rain storm; Prince dripping wet, playing like his life depended on every note, strutting, pulsating, dissolving into the music, becoming more than a performer, becoming more like a vessel, an instrument himself.

Prince once sang: "Life is just a party and parties weren't meant to last." But this one isn't done yet. In a vault underneath Paisley Park is a collection of hundreds of hours of unreleased work: top-secret jams and musical experiments that barely a soul has heard. When asked what it might contain, Prince's answer was cryptic, cocky and emblematic of the man we all loved: "The future." The sound of American celebrity is Prince; and damn does it sound good.
officialpaisleypark.com minneapolis.org

British travel writer Aaron Millar ran away from London in 2013 and has been hiding out in the Rocky Mountains of Boulder, Colorado ever since.
@aaronmwriter

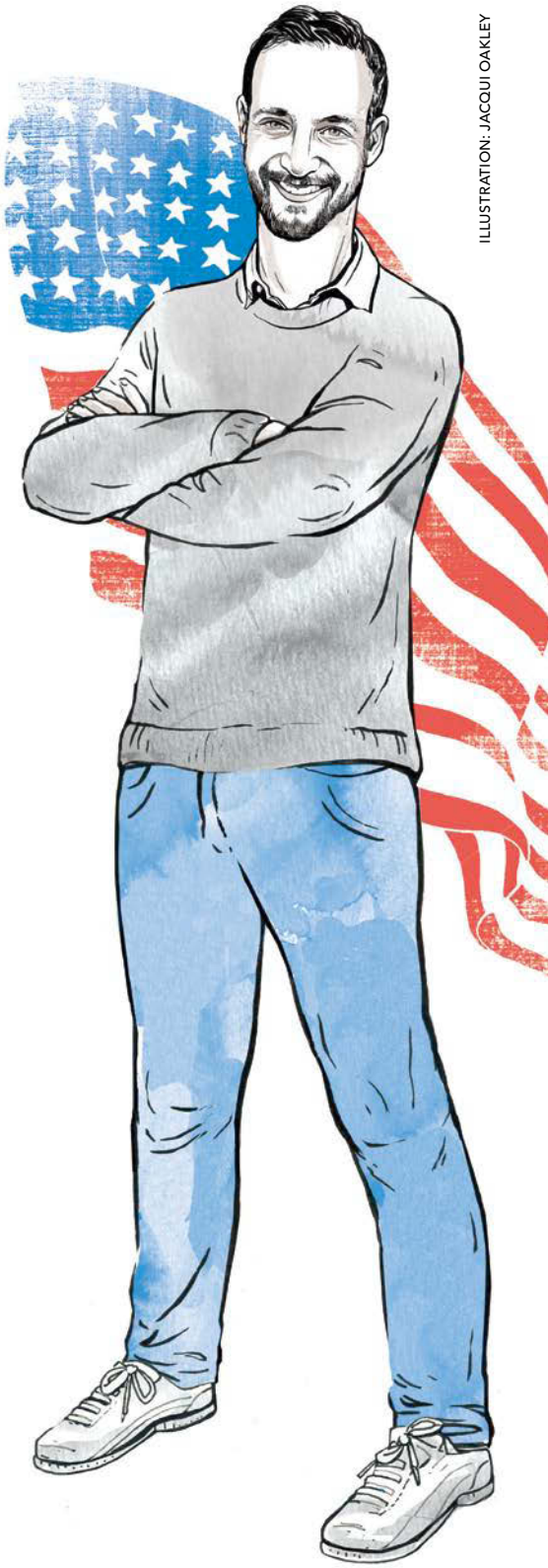


ILLUSTRATION: JACQUI OAKLEY

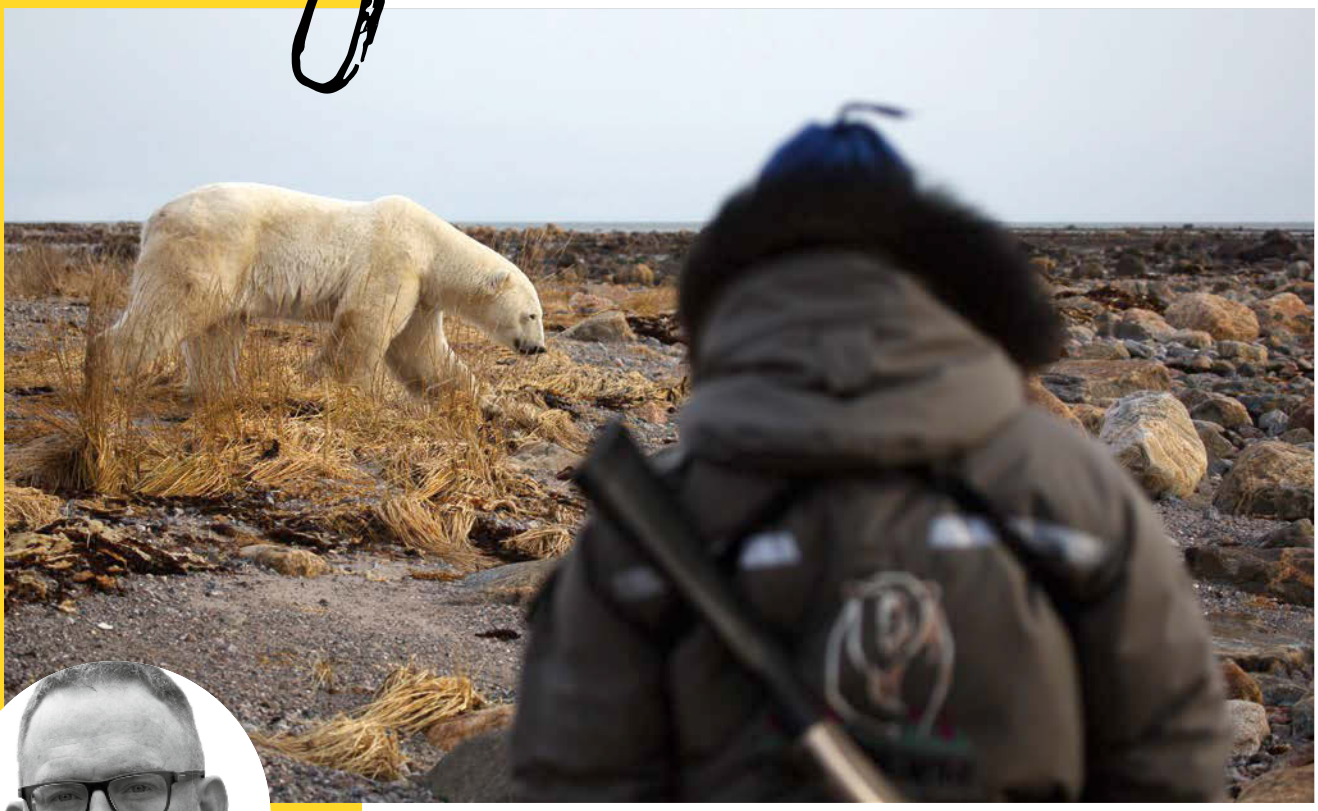

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The Blog

MANITOBA

CLOSE ENCOUNTER

A polar bear with boundary issues causes nerves to fray on the Hudson Bay





When Derek met us off the de Havilland light aircraft that brought us to the remote lodge, 40 miles north of the Canadian town of Churchill, he'd explained we'd need to stand together as a group upon encountering polar bears

A male polar bear — weighing in excess of 800lbs — is sauntering our way; little more than 30ft of snow-dusted ground stands between us. Should we be this near to a wild animal that almost certainly hasn't eaten anything in weeks?

Derek, our guide, refers to these creatures as the lords of the Arctic. Last night, during an after-dinner lecture by the fireside at Seal River Heritage Lodge, he reminded us that polar bears are the biggest of the world's land-dwelling carnivores.

There's no point in running, he told us. Polar bears may look ungainly but they can run at speeds of over 18mph. In my thick ski pants, boots and multiple layers, there's no way I'm going anywhere fast.

Anyway, running would be the worst thing any of us could do. When Derek met us off the de Havilland light aircraft that brought us to the remote lodge, 40 miles north of the Canadian town of Churchill, he'd explained we'd need to stand together as a group upon encountering polar bears.

So, I shouldn't really be down on my knees. I'd dropped to this position to photograph the bear at eye level when he started plodding in our direction. Through my lens, I can observe the individual strands of his cream-coloured hair, shifting on his face with each icy gust of wind.

"Stuart, get to your feet," commands Derek. Should the bear spot me in this position, he explains, he might think I'm injured, therefore vulnerable and easy prey. I mumble an apology as I struggle to my feet. Our 12-strong group then proceed to bunch together like penguins in a storm.

Derek and his colleague, Josh, are both carrying shotguns. Yesterday, they told us they've never been fired to protect a group. Will this be the first time? They'd explained that, in an emergency, the weapons would be discharged into the air, to scare off the

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bear. That would be a last resort. Firing at a bear would mean things had gone a long way south at this isolated northern location.

As well as the firearms, our two guides each carry an air horn plus a can of capsicum-based anti-bear spray, and there are also fireworks and even a cap gun to be used before a shotgun is fired. But is there time? This particular bear isn't behaving as might be expected. Normally, they avoid confrontation whenever possible, and at this time of year the creatures are virtually in a state of walking hibernation, waiting for Hudson Bay to freeze over so they can go hunting for seals. But this huge predator is making a beeline for us.

"That's close enough," says Derek to the bear with firmness and finality. Usually, the sound of a voice is sufficient to drive a polar bear away from a group of humans. But the giant carnivore ignores him and nonchalantly continues lumbering towards us. In this subarctic wilderness, even a minor injury can prove fatal. Today, it's a bracing -16C, although the mercury can plummet much lower in midwinter.

From his jacket pocket, Derek pulls out two egg-sized stones. They're not to throw. He clacks them together, causing the bear to stop in his tracks. Derek smacks them together again and the animal diverts left, away from us.

In unison, the members of the group utter a sigh of relief. The polar bear continues heading away from us, along the shoreline of Hudson Bay. "There goes the south end of a northbound bear," says Derek, as the bear plods off into the distance and our hearts resume normal service. **STUART FORSTER**

churchillwild.com travelmanitoba.com uk-keepexploring.canada.travel

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IMAGE: STUART FORSTER

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Weekender

COUNTY MAYO

A rugged region of mountains, lakes and castles perfect for a scenic road trip **WORDS:** *Jack Southan*

There's little doubt as to what's considered County Mayo's main draw. Venture out along one of its coastal roads in almost any direction, and in no time you'll be struck by the implausible beauty of this Western Irish landscape.

The key to such an endeavour is the Wild Atlantic Way — a coast-hugging road network that runs for over 1,600 miles around Ireland's west coast. The section that passes through Mayo is stunning: winding roads cut through orange-green moorland, dappled with heather and lichen-covered rock; past shady woodland dells or along precipitous coastal cliffs; and through picturesque towns nestled on the hills above pristine emerald lakes that sparkle in the sunlight.

More often than not it's practically deserted, too. It all makes for a fine short road trip, through a landscape littered with ancient castles and grand monasteries, with days bookended by hearty breakfasts in cosy inns and evenings of warm fires and live music in the pubs of towns such as Westport. And if you think the mainland is spectacular, just wait until you see the islands.





IMAGES: GETTY

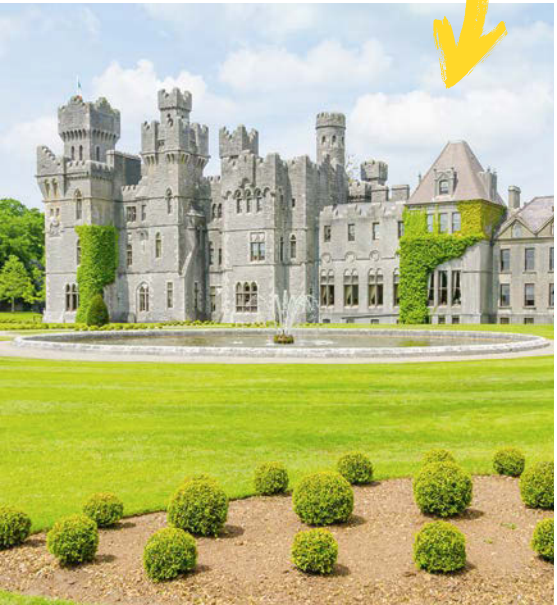
CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Downpatrick Head, Ballycastle; Kylemore Abbey, Connemara National Park; pilgrim climbing Croagh Patrick; Ashford Castle, Cong

Island life

The largest of the country's many islands, Achill offers perhaps the best scenic drive anywhere in Mayo. With its dramatic sea cliffs, ramshackle houses shrouded in mist and miles of wild terrain (Achill is 86% peat bog) it feels like a remote, unexplored wilderness. The views are stunning wherever you drive although Keel Strand, with its turquoise waters and white-pebble beach, provides Achill's *pièce de résistance*.

FIT FOR A KING

Set on the banks of a lake and surrounded by manicured gardens, Ashford Castle is everything you'd want from a luxury country hotel. Suits of armour stand guard in the hallways and classical artwork adorns the walls. The hotel is made for long stays, with four restaurants and activities such as falconry and fishing. *ashfordcastle.com*





THREE TO TRY

Golden oldies

KYLEMORE ABBEY

Just over the county border in Galway, on the banks of Pollacappul Lake, this neo-gothic Benedictine abbey sits in a 1,000-acre estate and features a Victorian walled garden, plus numerous woodland and lakeside walks. *kylemoreabbey.com*

WESTPORT HOUSE

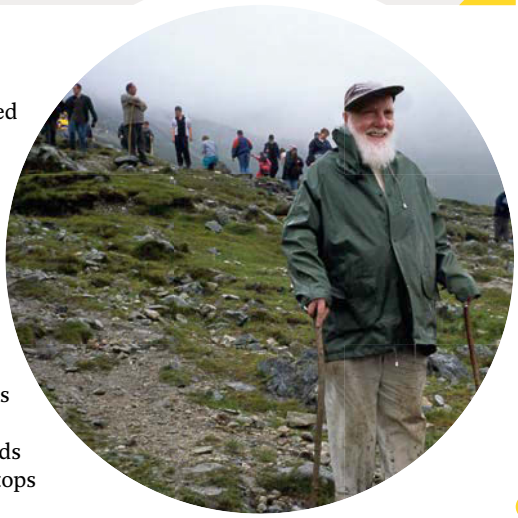
A grand old estate, originally built in 1650 by the great-great-granddaughter of local legend Grace O'Malley (the Pirate Queen). Today there's a campsite, Pirate Adventure Park and Birds of Prey Centre in its grounds. *westporthouse.ie*

ROSSERK FRIARY

A ruin, yes, but an impressive one. What remains of Rosserk Friary has been standing for nearly 600 years. The oldest example of its kind in Ireland, it's wonderfully atmospheric and at dusk, sunlight refracts across the lake onto the ancient stone walls.

Croagh Patrick

Known in Ireland as The Sacred Mountain, Croagh Patrick is famous among hikers and pilgrims, with the four-hour hike to the summit undertaken by an estimated one million people a year. Though the way is rough and can be a little tricky at times, the determined will be treated to one of the best views in all of Ireland — mile upon mile of blue water, green islands and yellow gorse-covered hilltops spread out in all directions.



EYEWITNESS

THE LOST VALLEY

A dull thud comes from under the car as the wheel dips into the pothole and bounces back out, jerking my head forward. The scenery so far has been pretty distracting — a patchwork of earthen yellows and verdant greens — and it seems I haven't been concentrating on the road ahead.

I pull over and check my map. I'm pretty sure I'm somewhere south of Louisburgh. The road has become so narrow I'm not certain I'm on the right track — the signposts have disappeared and the tarmac wanders aimlessly ahead with grassland on both sides. The road leads towards a low hanging cloud sitting between two large hills in the distance.

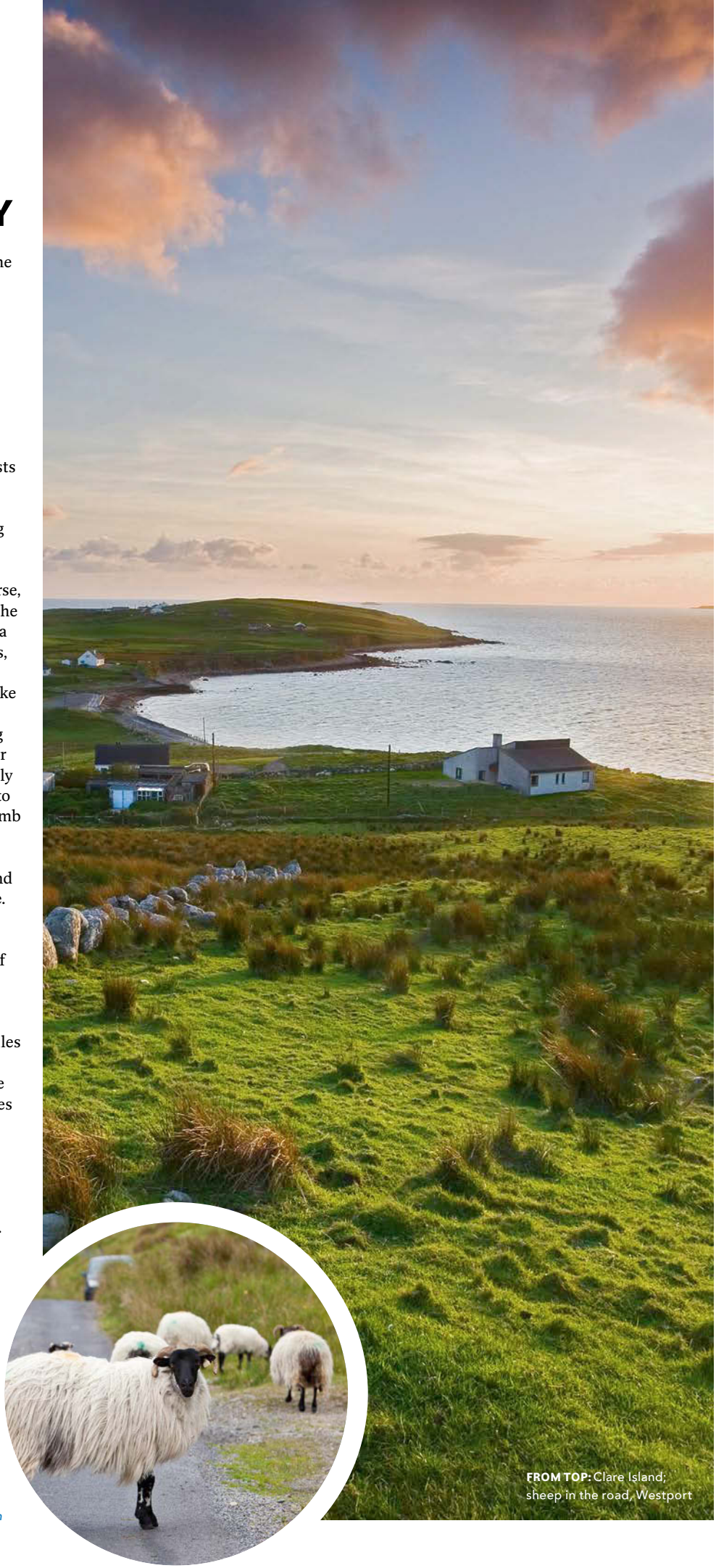
The map suggests I continue on this course, so I set off again and try to avoid wrecking the car any further. The trail takes me through a wild and barren expanse of land, past rivers, through boggy woodland and tiny farming hamlets, and all the while the road twists like a racetrack between the fields.

As I head into the large valley, and the fog begins to swirl around me, hanging low over the bushland on either side, I'm momentarily sad to see the open fields behind me begin to fade from view. Then, the road begins to climb and as the cloud breaks I see the enormity of the hills around me. They jut up almost vertically into the white sky above, rocky and foreboding. It comes as a complete surprise.

As the ground starts to level out, a few sheep trot past, crossing from bank to bank. Then, as I reach the top, I find myself pulling over once more — not because I've hit a pothole again though, but for the chance to take in the view that's suddenly emerged. The land opens up for several miles ahead, the valley sits in full glorious view in all directions, and at the centre is a huge mirrored lake, sparkling as the wind ripples its surface.

There's no mention of this place on my map and I can't seem to work out exactly where I am in relation to my destination. I continue to breathe it all in, and by the time I head off, the light is starting to fade. Eventually I hit a main road, and as I turn off I glance behind me and catch sight of a wooden signpost pointing back in the direction I've come from. I can't help but laugh as I read the words: 'The Lost Valley'.

Flybe, Ryanair and Aer Lingus all fly to Knock from various UK airports and car rental can be arranged on arrival. Rooms at Ashford Castle start from €595 (£530) a night for a double room, B&B. *ashfordcastle.com*
To plan your desired section of the self-drive Wild Atlantic Way, visit *ireland.com* *wildatlanticway.com*



FROM TOP: Clare Island; sheep in the road, Westport

IMAGES: GETTY

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LAOS

If you dine in Laos, don't expect the familiar sweet tangs of neighbouring Thailand. Here you'll find spicy yet often bitter dishes are mopped up by generous handfuls of the ubiquitous sticky rice. Words & images: Audrey Gillan

I'm bashing lemongrass stalks with a wooden baton. The sound of my thwacking mingles with the laughter of children splashing in the pools of the waterfall, just beyond the kitchen where I'm learning about Lao cuisine. My teacher is showing me how to mould a minced pork mixture around the hard, citrusy herb to make delicate kebabs that will be grilled over charcoal.

Vanvisa at the Falls is quite possibly the most spectacularly located cooking class I've ever seen. It's situated at the foot of the glorious Kuang Si Falls, 20 miles south west of Luang Prabang, around a basin ideal for swimming and floating, as the local kids do, in old rubber inner tubes. A bamboo bridge spans the basin, and as I walked across it to reach my class, my heart sang.

Vanvisa is by no means fancy — there are no cookers, just three charcoal-fired burners lined along a rear wall. However, above them an open window looks out onto both the cascades and the stiller aquamarine water below, where butterflies dance in their hundreds and brightly coloured dragonflies hover. The organic gardens here are also spectacular — there are herbs, medicinal plants, fruits and vegetables, all sown by owner Vandara Amphaiphone, co-author of the book *Food And Travel Lao*.

I'm the only pupil, ably assisted by my jolly driver Sung and guided by Sit Ti Moong Khun, who goes by the nickname Nou. He explains that lemongrass, garlic and onion are the cornerstones of Lao food and that many of the ingredients are from the jungle. He asks me to finely slice barbecue pork, to be used later to make *laap*, which could be considered the national dish of Laos. We mix spring onion, shallot, chilli, galangal, mint, *calamansi* juice, soy, sticky rice powder, and the pork and assemble it all into a fragrant salad.

After the cookery class, I travel to Luang Prabang, where I learn that not only does sticky rice accompany almost every meal and every mouthful in Laos, the sound of it begins the day. As monks seek alms at dawn, balls of sticky rice are given as offerings; when they hit the metal of the monks' vessels, a sonorous bong rings out. Since the geography of Laos is made up of around 70% mountains, sticky rice is the easiest crop to

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Monks seek alms at dawn; lemongrass kebabs; locally grown chillis








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Five Food Finds

1

STICKY RICE

Rolled into a ball, it's used to mop up food at almost every meal.

2

LAAP

A salad of marinated meat or fish sometimes served raw, with herbs, green vegetables, spices and toasted sticky rice.

3

TAM MAK HOONG

This spicy green papaya salad made from the raw fruit is eaten all over Southeast Asia but was born in Laos.

4

BEERLAO

Brewed from rice and malt, this is the most popular domestic beer.

5

KAIPEN AND JEOW BONG

Mekong riverweed fried until crisp and served with a chilli dip and added buffalo skin.

nurture here and, as such, more than 500 types of it are grown. Rolled into a ball, it's used to mop up food, so neither cutlery or chopsticks are necessary.

To find out more about this ubiquitous staple of the local cuisine, I visit Living Land Farm, located just three miles outside Luang Prabang. This organic city farm has demonstration paddy fields where visitors can learn all about the process of planting, growing and harvesting the rice. My guide, Chilee, tells me that sticky rice takes three to four months to grow: "Starting from the seeds, until it's served on the table, there are 13 steps. But that's an unlucky number, so we add a step — eating."

Chilee takes me out into the thick, oozing mud of the paddy, where every footstep is accompanied by a rather satisfying squelch. Rice plants are sown three shoots at a time, all by hand. "After this work, your back is sore from planting all day, but you don't mind," says Chilee. It's labour intensive subsistence farming but many Lao will tell you they're contented doing this work because it's generally done by families and communities together. When the plants are yellow, Chilee explains, they're ready to harvest. One seedling can sprout about 600-700 grains, which are left to dry in the sun for a day or two.

Coming in from the field, Chilee shows me how to grind and cook the rice. Then we roll and toss it in a large cone-shaped basket to form a big, sticky ball.

In the farm restaurant, which sits on stilts, I eat snacks made from sticky rice and rice flour before tucking into a lunch that includes traditional chicken soup with herbs, lemongrass and pork with *taro*, onion and mushroom from the garden. I'm introduced to Mekong riverweed, an algae collected from an oxygen-rich part of the river which is pounded into flat sheets, sprinkled with sesame seeds then fried. It's served with *jeow bong* — a chilli paste made with buffalo skin. Buffalo, which graze beside the Mekong, features heavily in Luang Prabang cooking — the meat is often candied, made into sausages, served in stews or used raw in *laap*.

In spite of being a neighbour to Vietnam and Thailand, Laos has a very different cuisine, borrowing relatively few elements from across its borders. It is, in essence, a food based on foraging and the jungle, where people eat what they can find — this might include river crabs, catfish, frogs, wild birds and insects. I see this at Luang Prabang's early morning market, where old ladies hunker down beside empty rice sacks on which are displayed their sometimes rather paltry offerings — a few potatoes, lemongrass, some fresh herbs maybe, wild mushrooms or beans. Further along, though, there are proper stalls offering roasted rats and snakes. I even spot (with a little horror) a tiny owl in a cage.

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Cooking sticky rice; preparing fish on bamboo spears; Mekong riverweed



Still, strolling around Luang Prabang in the early morning light is a joy in itself. A French colonial town, the continental influence isn't just evident in the beautiful architecture of this calm riverside city, which sits on a peninsula at the confluence of the Nam Khan and Mekong rivers. It's also there in the coffee, the baguettes and a local appropriation of mayonnaise.

Together with my InsideAsia guide, Bounglieng, and my driver Sung, I head north to Nong Khiaw, a little town on the banks of the Ou River. We row out in two little boats to try to net some fish — the lines are dropped in as circular a shape as possible, then surface of the water is battered with bamboo sticks to try to drive the fish into the net. My party has no success, but Sung comes back smiling; he has enough for lunch. The fish are speared with bamboo and grilled over a little fire on the riverbank, served with sticky rice and a chicken's head and feet.

It's with Sung and Bounglieng that I learn about the Laos' love for their national beer, Beerlao, as well as *lao lao*, a fierce rice spirit. In a local, rather than a tourist restaurant (it's a town that caters mainly for backpackers), we eat in traditional Lao style, where everything is served at the same time and shared.

I'd quickly discovered that Lao cuisine isn't sweet like that of Vietnam or Thailand — it's far more spicy, sour, salty and bitter. But I hadn't realised quite how fond Lao people are of that bitterness or just what bitter really means until our buffalo *laap* arrives on the table. I ball some saucy meat into my sticky rice and as the taste sinks in, my face very quickly twists in shock to resemble a wounded gargoyle. It turns out the bitterness has been turned up a few notches by the addition of buffalo bile. Sung laughs, then picks up five chillies and eats them with a forkful of papaya salad, explaining that it's "not spicy enough". I can only imagine the inferno inside my driver's mouth, and quickly order another Beerlao. I can see why the Lao adore it.

INSIDEASIA TOURS offers a 10-night Laos Discovery tailored trip which costs from £1,270 per person, based on two sharing and excluding international flights. The price includes 10 nights' accommodation, all guided transport between destinations, transfers, breakfasts, a cooking class at Kuang Si and a number of other experiences. *insideasiatours.com*

A TASTE OF *Luang Prabang*



TAMARIND

There's an 'explorer' menu and a degustation menu, while a less exotic menu includes sweet dried buffalo meat that tastes like candy, Luang Prabang pork sausage and *orlarm*, a thick soup with chicken, aubergine, chilli and local vegetables.
HOW MUCH: A Luang Prabang meal, with starters, main courses, side dishes and sticky rice, from £11.50 per person, but with a two-person minimum. Individual dishes are also available.
tamarindlaos.com

3 NAGAS

Set menus include a Laos degustation and an explorer, but there's also an a la carte menu that includes *oua si khay mhoo* (deep-fried lemongrass stuffed with minced pork and local herbs) and *khoua kai sai cheo bong* (stir-fried chicken with shallots, lemongrass, kaffir lime leaves and spicy buffalo jam).
HOW MUCH: Three courses and sticky rice without wine from £12.50 per person.
3-nagas.com/gastronomy/3-nagas-restaurant-bar

MANDA DE LAOS

This beautiful restaurant specialises in Laotian family cuisine — *manda* means 'mother' in Laotian. Starters include a charcoaled *laap* ball and deep-fried Mekong fish stuffed in bamboo. There's a do-it-yourself *laap* with ingredients in little dishes for you to assemble and for mains there's buffalo steak with lime leaves, galangal and crispy garlic.
HOW MUCH: Three courses without wine from £17 per person.
mandadelaos.com

FROM LEFT: Early morning market; buffalo laap





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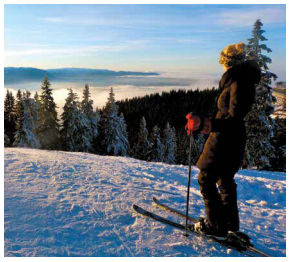
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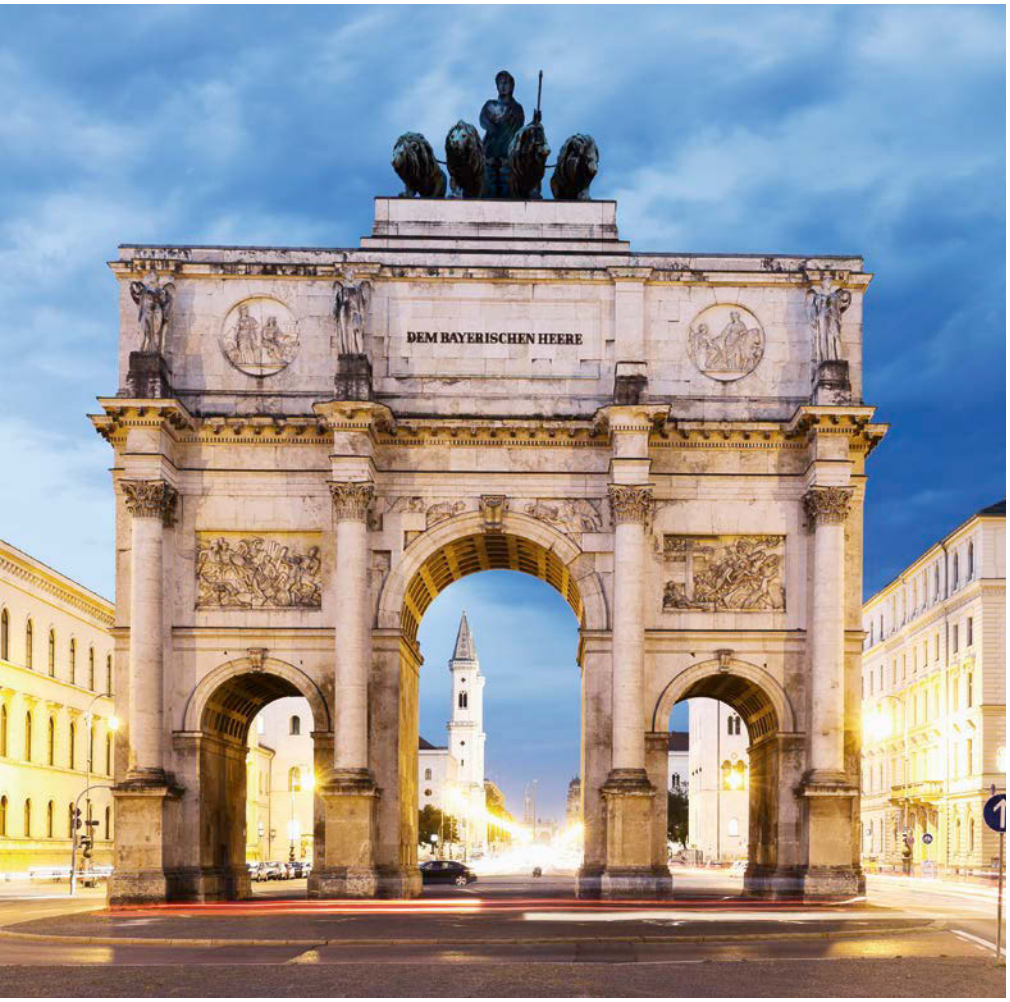
MUNICH

Far from being all beer halls and bawdiness, the Bavarian capital has a much softer side, with hippy hang-outs, plenty of green space and a laid-back LGBT scene. Words: David Whitley



Come to Munich in search of one stereotype — clinking steins in behemoth beer halls and a diet entirely consisting of various types of sausage — and you can certainly find it. But you'd have to be seriously dedicated to this temporary vision of Bavarian kitsch not to notice the reality is quite different. The wine and cocktail bars seem a bit too prevalent. The architecture is a little too elegant. People are talking rather than roaring. Munich is a city of smoothed edges. It's wealthy, but not brash, and it's not nearly as conservative as the rest of Germany will paint it. Moreover, the high quality of living makes it a laid-back city to explore, and that becomes clear as soon as you stray from the city centre.

ILLUSTRATION: KERRY HYNDMAN







Schwabing/Maxvorstadt

Markus Wimmer is keeping a careful eye on his still. He's got a batch of his precious gin on the go, and it's starting to make bubbling noises. "Gin distilling is really kicking off in Bavaria," he says. "We've always had a lot of fruit brandies, and there are 100 or so small distilleries around."

The Distillers Bar is the first indication that Munich may not be quite as beery as its Oktoberfest-burnished reputation may suggest. Since 2012, it's been selling smooth wheat-based vodkas, and that was joined two years later by the first Bavarian rum, made from imported Nicaraguan molasses. Markus's gin is the latest addition to the cocktail list and tasting sessions.

It's fitting that this exists in Schwabing, a neighbourhood that usually gets billed as 'bohemian', but is better defined by its inventiveness and iconoclasm.

The Alter Simpl — ostensibly a proper old pub with black-painted wooden walls and creaky floorboards — is a good example of this. Framed on the walls are copies of Simplicissimus, the provocative, satirical magazine that helped define the turn-of-the-20th-century scene. Its writers would meet here, but others would be involved at cabaret venues or the Academy of Fine Arts. Here, belying the stuffy name, students were always encouraged to do their own thing — and that led to the likes of Wassily Kandinsky kicking off their own movements.

Visitors are as free as the students — they can wander through the building, taking in whatever works are being exhibited at the time, and head out the back to an impromptu bar set out on the lawns. Here, people sprawl out on an old mattress, others make do with wooden pallets, DJs play the most stereotypical hippy music imaginable from a rudimentary shack, and the actual bar is a food truck-esque cart.

Such improvisation is becoming a trend in Schwabing. There has been a recent mushrooming of the sort of kiosks that would normally sell newspapers turning into small bars. They tend to have no name, stick a few chairs outside, then sell basic food and as many cans of beer as they can store. These bonsai beer gardens sit happily alongside old, hoary spots like Hopfendolde, an unremarkable old man's pub unless you turn up on a Sunday, when most of the space is given over to a flea market. Schwabing may be solidly gentrified, but its spirit still bursts out whenever a gap presents itself.

Here, people sprawl out on an old mattress, others make do with wooden pallets, DJs play the most stereotypical hippy music imaginable from a rudimentary shack, and the actual bar is a food truck-esque cart

IMAGES: GETTY; G STANDL; D. VERSTL

Haidhausen

The shorthand description of Haidhausen is that it's where people move to when they're priced out of Schwabing. Across the vast Englischer Garten park and the Isar river, it pilfers a little of Schwabing's creativity, but an awful lot of its mellowness.

It's a very green part of Munich, both visually and politically. The riverside stretch of the Englischer Garten is perhaps the most obvious manifestation of this, but it's not the most representative.

On and around Preysingstrasse are lots of small houses, originally built for migrant workers but now more often than not home to artists. Peek around the side, and you'll often spot a courtyard covered in trees and climbing plants, or a lane leading to a house inexplicably enveloped in grape vines.

Street names have a French flavour, buildings have strong art nouveau leanings, any spare public space seems to be turned into a park, and languorously sipped coffees in corner cafes are the default setting.

This all builds to something of a crescendo in Wiener Platz, where wooden huts sell meats, cheeses, chocolates and Aperol. Cafes squeeze into fairy-tale houses, and the Maratonga dance club is a slice of time-warp charm. Oldies flock to it, and the local joke is that it's the best place in town to pick up a rich widow. Maratonga is in the bowels of the Hofbräukeller, one of Munich's vast beer halls. Come on a weekend afternoon, and the beer garden — all egalitarian long benches, huge glasses of frothing pilsner and a stoically parping oompah band — will be full. Shade is provided by chestnut trees. Back before the days of refrigeration, they were an essential component in keeping the beer stored below cool. Now, they just stop people from getting quite as badly sunburned.

There's another beer garden that feels a little more in touch with Haidhausen's more creative side, though. Next to the glorious Müllersche Volksbad, which looks like a riverside palace but is actually the most lavish public swimming bath you're ever likely to see, is a former power station. The Muffatwerk has been transformed into an entertainment venue, but the (by Munich's gargantuan standards) small beer garden does things a little differently. The soundtrack is as likely to be reggae as oompah, there are deck chairs as well as communal benches, and organic sausages and veggie options are proudly on the menu. Traditions, it seems, are made to be tweaked — if not broken.

OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Munich's Victory Gate; German beer and bangers; Munich beer hall band member playing small tuba
BELOW: The Englischer Garten





When in Munich...

1

SURF'S UP

Munich is a somewhat unlikely surf capital, but an artificial wave on the Eisbach at the southern end of the Englischer Garten has turned into a bizarre inland surfing hotspot.

2

AL FRESCO REFRESHMENT

A good general rule of thumb is that anywhere you're allowed to eat an apple, you're allowed to drink a beer. This means that, given even the vaguest hint of sun, locals gather up bottles and picnic supplies and head outside.

3

CULTURAL SUNDAYS

Many of the city's museums only charge €1 for entry on Sundays. These include big hitters such as the Alte Pinakothek, the Bayerisches Nationalmuseum and the Pinakothek Der Moderne.

4

CLOTHING OPTIONAL

The Englischer Garten is the city's most popular hangout. And that applies to nudists too. There's a section of the park where it's all right to let it all hang loose, as you'll soon discover when you accidentally wander through it.

5

HANDY TICKETS

As expected for Germany, Munich's public transport system is excellent. Do as the locals do and download the MVG Fahrinfo München app, and buy scannable day tickets on your phone.

6

BEER ETIQUETTE

Boozing is designed to be sociable here. The idea of the big long beer hall and beer garden tables is to meet and talk to others.







Glockenbachviertel

The rainbow flags fly along Müllerstrasse, the hub of Munich's gay scene. They aren't up for any particular event — they're just there, matter-of-factly, a part of the decor.

The area around Müllerstrasse, Glockenbachviertel, sits to the south of the city centre near the Sendlinger Tor station. It plays host to the sauna that Freddie Mercury used to frequent, and is unmistakably the 'hood that Munich's LGBT community will default to. But whereas in other cities that might mean the area is defined by its nightlife, here you're more likely to hear the sound of people chatting over coffee.

Glockenbachviertel's air of nonchalant acceptance extends to anyone who wants to open up a small shop and try something niche. And nowhere is this more obvious than Hans-Sachs-Strasse.

Here, Eisenblätter & Triska manages to take styles of hats that went out of fashion decades ago and give them a modern spin. And Noh Nee sums it all up rather nicely by selling dirndls — the traditional Bavarian women's outfits that you'd probably see on a waitress in an advert for a German Christmas market. The twist? All of them are made with wildly colourful African fabrics.

This unshowy, anything-goes attitude extends to the cafes, too. From the outside Bamyan Narges is an exquisitely gorgeous slice of exoticism. Hand-carved tables, embroidered cushions and low red benches immediately grab the attention. Then the wall embellishments go the whole hog, supposedly representing the guarding eye of Afghan mythology.

The whole thing is a labour of love personally designed and overseen by Narges, the Afghan immigrant owner who has decided to impose a taste of home in the most visually appealing way imaginable. The food is pretty sensational too — pickled chicken breast cooked over a lava rock grill and rice dishes with raisins, pistachios and almonds are on a menu where everything leaps out as unusual and tempting.

Anywhere else, this could be a show-stopper. Here, it stands in its own little slot with barely anyone batting an eyelid. And that, it seems, is just the way it should be.

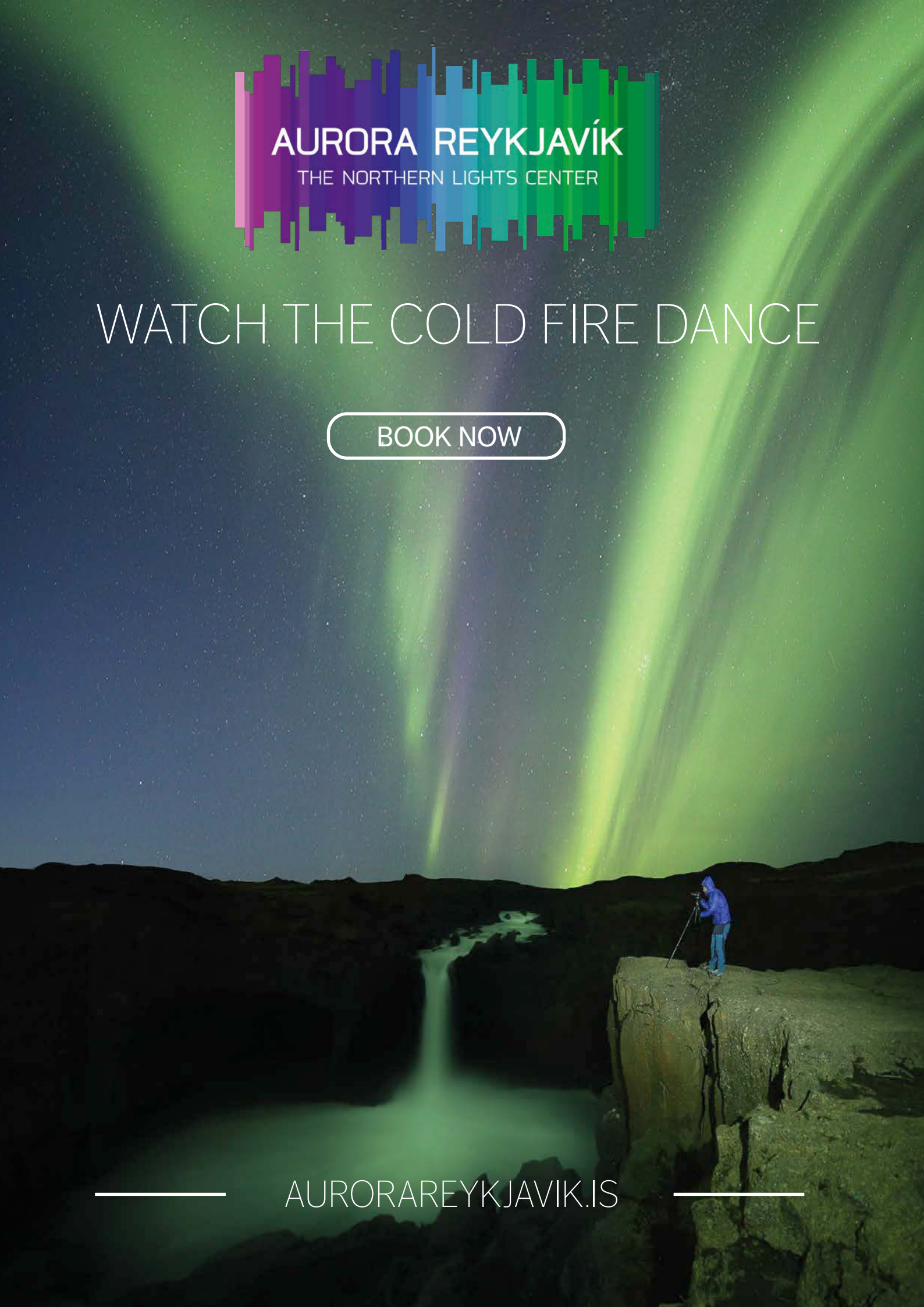
CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: The Alter Peter (Old Peter) tower; a Eisenblätter & Triska hat; Katrin Eisenblätter and Astrid Triska

MORE INFO

Distillers Bar. *munichdistillers.de*
Academy of Fine Arts. *adbk.de*
Maratonga. *maratonga.de*
Hofbräukeller. *hofbraeukeller.de*
Müllersche Volksbad. *swm.de*
Muffatwerk. *muffatwerk.de*
Eisenblätter & Triska. *eisenblaetter-triska.de*
Museums. *museen-in-muenchen.de*
Munich tourist board. *muenchen.de*
Local news and lifestyle. *thelocal.de/munich*
English language discussion. *toytowngermany.com*

EASYJET flies to Munich from Luton, Gatwick, Stansted, Manchester and Edinburgh. Prices start from around £65 return. The Bold Hotel manages to combine smart design, affordability and a sociable vibe — particularly on the outdoor deck. Doubles cost from €72. *easyjet.com bold-hotels.com*

IMAGES: SIGI MÜLLER; DAVID GüNTSCH


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Sleep

AUCKLAND

Its hotel scene was once stuck in the past, but stylish new accommodation is slowly taking over New Zealand's largest city. Words: David Whitley



Auckland is the largest city in New Zealand, the de facto capital of Polynesia and is changing rapidly, but few people seem to stay there. For travellers, it's long been a stepping stone either to the rest of New Zealand or the South Pacific. Some elements have always been there — the easily accessible islands in the Hauraki Gulf, which offer wildlife and wine, the ancient forests of the Waitakere Ranges and the west coast's black-sand beaches. But others are emerging. Several new restaurant and shopping areas are springing up: the appallingly named but actually rather impressive Britomart Transport Centre downtown or Ponsonby Central, somewhere between posh food court and restaurant strip. A new metro system is being built and the city centre is smartening up. Accommodation is also improving. Historically, the scene has followed the wider trend in New Zealand — slightly underwhelming hotels plus some genuinely interesting B&Bs and lodges that ramp things up a level. Now, though, there are a growing number of exceptions to this rule and there's never been a better time to stay in Auckland.

IMAGE: GETTY



For harbour views

£££ HILTON AUCKLAND

At first glance, it'd be easy to think a massive cruise ship had bagged a prime spot next to the ferry terminal. But it's just the Hilton, sticking out into the harbour. The lobby's light-wood floor looks like a planked deck, dangling ropes with knots are used as decoration and massive yachting murals drop down from the mezzanine. The marine theme is a little more subtle in the recently refurbished rooms, though the wave pattern carpet is rather lovely. The pool is surprisingly small and shaded, so if you fancy a dip it's best to hop next door and take a ferry to Waiheke for a day at the beach.
ROOMS: From NZ$331 (£186), room only.
hilton.com/auckland



For island life

£££ THE OYSTER INN

Waiheke Island is a near-perfect slice of loveliness, a 40-minute ferry flit from the city centre. It's (somewhat reluctantly) part of Auckland, but has become a handsome haven of beaches, scenic clifftops, olive oil makers and wineries. Oneroa is the main settlement and the Oyster Inn has a justified reputation as its prime seafood joint. But it also has three rather dreamy rooms upstairs, which all give off a Scandi-meets-Cape Cod vibe. Light-wood floors, white-painted ceiling beams and pictures of sailing yachts are topped up with stripy umbrellas and beach towels, covering most weather eventualities. Palm trees stand proud outside and shipping maps adorn the corridors, echoing the island vibe nicely.
ROOMS: From NZ$245 (£138), room only.
theoysterinn.co.nz



For foodies

£££ SKYCITY GRAND

Of Auckland's business-centred hotels, the SkyCity Grand is arguably the slickest. Vast comfy beds, bold lobby art, eye-popping views from the rooms on the higher levels... It does what it does well, and is connected by a footbridge to the SkyCity casino complex. But what's far more interesting is what's grown up around it. The block of Federal Street that SkyCity occupies is now a hive of restaurants. These range from the smart Sugar Club on the 53rd level of the Sky Tower to the chilled Federal Delicatessen, as well as relative stalwarts such as tapas trendsetter Bellota and ultra-hip Kiwiana.

ROOMS: From NZ$290 (£163), room only.
skycityauckland.co.nz

For local life

££ PONSONBY MANOR GUEST HOUSE

Barring Waiheke Island, Ponsonby is by far Auckland's best area to stay, and Ponsonby Manor Guest House channels the locale's historic side — the building is around 150 years old. Black and white photos of trams hang proudly above the beds, and there are some cute vintage desks. But there's more to it than just a wistful longing for the past. There's a communal kitchen and barbecue in the garden for guests to use. The other draw in the garden at Ponsonby Manor is its very own crop of bananas, grapefruit, strawberries and *feijoa* — feel free to help yourself to ripe ones if you're feeling peckish.

ROOMS: From NZ$152 (£85), B&B.
ponsonbymanor.co.nz




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For style

£££ HOTEL DEBRETT

The Hotel DeBrett is proudly trying to do something different. Theatrical red and green tassels replace do-not-disturb signs, bedside tables look like Lilliputian school desks, and old-fashioned dial radios sit on top of them. The furniture looks like it's been lovingly picked out by someone trawling antique shops, and the walls have been covered in paintings. The overall feel is one of vintage and modernity, and the air of careful curation stretches as far as the mini bars with their Auckland-roasted coffees, locally made chocolate and manuka teas.

ROOMS: From NZ$390 (£219), room only.
hoteldebrett.com



For longer stays

££ QUEST PARNELL

Inside a boxy, brutalist building, the Quest Parnell is one of the strongest options outside the city centre. That's partly because it's in schmoozy, old money Parnell, where pretty Victorian architecture mixes with a big concentration of cafes and gift shops. But it's also because it has rather snazzy monochrome apartments — try and bag one with a big balcony looking out over the Sky Tower. There's a weird and wonderful heated lap pool on site, and anyone hunkering down for more than a couple of nights will be pleased to find that apartments come with a mini-kitchen, washer and dryer.

ROOMS: From NZ$189 (£106), room only.
questapartments.co.nz



For heritage

£££ PEACE AND PLENTY INN

Forget contemporary cool, this deluxe B&B in seaside suburb Devonport goes the whole hog for vivid Victoriana, and pulls it off. Big lavender bushes in the front garden give way to a *kauri* timber building brimming with old-fashioned travel chests, stained-glass windows and furniture passed down through generations. Mammoth servings of complimentary port and sherry sit on the chests of drawers, all the food is organic, and the owner has arranged for discounts at several Devonport cafes for anyone showing their room key. There are also two gorgeous chocolate cocker spaniels and you're more than welcome to take them out for a walk.
ROOMS: From $257 (£144), B&B.
peaceandplenty.co.nz

THREE TO TRY

For backpackers

£ VERANDAHS BACKPACKER LODGE

Neatly sandwiched between Auckland's two most enjoyable strips — hip Ponsonby Road and eclectic Karangahape Road — Verandahs is by no means a new generation hostel, but does have some pleasant surprises. There are several individual bathrooms and no bunk beds. The lounge has a piano, guitar and board games, there are balconies to sit out on, plus a large garden with sun-loungers, a barbecue and pizza oven.
ROOMS: Dorm beds from NZ$32 (£18), doubles from NZ$82 (£46), en-suite doubles from NZ$102 (£57), room only. *verandahs.co.nz*

For wildlife

£ TIRITIRI MATANGI ISLAND BUNKHOUSE

Standing in the shadow of New Zealand's oldest working lighthouse is the former keeper's cottage, now turned into basic accommodation for those who want to stay on a rather remarkable island. Tiritiri Matangi — in Auckland's Hauraki Gulf — is used by the Department of Conservation as a haven for rare bird species including the little spotted kiwi, which only come out at night. That's where the bunkhouse comes in. Bring your own food and linen, and the views are majestic.
ROOMS: Beds from NZ$30 (£17), room only.
doc.govt.nz/tiritiribunkhouse

For art

£ GREAT PONSONBY ART HOTEL

The love that has gone into the Great Ponsonby Art Hotel shines through at every turn, from the Fairtrade teas and hot chocolates in the rooms to the work-of-art rugs on the creaky floors. Fijian tapa cloths are used as decoration, windows have Pacific Island patterns on the glass and door numbers are tile art. The lounge area is a fine place to enjoy the free welcome drink while asking the friendly staff for local restaurant tips. And then you can check out the private art collection.
ROOMS: From NZ$162 (£91), B&B.
greatpons.co.nz

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FORGET PRISTINE PISTES, THERE ARE PLENTY OF OTHER WAYS TO EMBRACE THE WINTER, WHETHER IT'S THROUGH EXTREME SKIING, JOURNEYING ACROSS FROZEN LANDSCAPES OR SIMPLY LEARNING TO SURVIVE THE COLD

ICE AGE



IMAGES: JESSE HOFFMAN; AWL IMAGES

WINTER'S SPELL

A SNOWMOBILE RIDE THROUGH NORWAY'S FAR NORTH REVEALS THE POWER — BOTH DANGEROUS AND BENIGN — OF MOTHER NATURE





IMAGES: RENATO GRANIERI



CLOCKWISE: Snowmobiling from Tempelfjorden; guide Marte Myskja Saeterboe; snowmobiles at Eskerfossen

Marte is clambering over her snowmobile, waving at the others behind me to stop. Meanwhile, I'm parked precariously on a soaring white hill, carefully applying enough gas to stop myself from slowly sliding backwards. "I'm stuck," she calls out when the others catch up. "Turn off your engines. And remember your hand brakes!"

I am reassured; it appears even the most seasoned snowmobilers get stuck.

Following her orders, we jump off the scooter and trudge uphill to help her, the fluffy virgin snow coming well up our shins. "You guys pull, and I'll slowly back it up," she announces. "Just don't stand too close behind me unless you want to be under the scooter."

We begin heaving it backwards, though I fear I'm doing little to help. My arms ache from the past two days of driving around Spitsbergen, the largest island of northern Norway's Svalbard archipelago, and I'm convinced this snowmobile is as heavy as a horse. Marte, our guide, fiddles with the levers and buttons and slowly the vehicle starts to edge back. But our efforts are ultimately no good; it buries itself deeper into the dense snow. A new tactic: now armed with the giant shovel she keeps on the back of the scooter, she begins digging a path out, hurling flurries of snow over her head.

We give it another shot. With an aggressive growl from the engine, Marte zips up the hill, sending a shower of snowflakes in her wake. Relieved, I can just about hear her cheer over the sigh of relief echoing inside my helmet before we follow suit, careful to trace the fresh, safe track she has just carved through the snow.

When we all slow to a halt some minutes later, I take off the helmet, sacrificing my cheeks to the tingling cold, and look out below us. Tempelfjord stretches far and wide into the distance, flanked by soaring, table-like mountains draped in snow, the inky-blue water scattered with icebergs.

"Worth getting stuck for, eh?" Marte says with a grin. She seems so pleased I almost think it was part of a plan. "Over there," she continues, pointing to a faraway point, "is where two glaciers meet. The ice breaks off and floats into the fjord, but last year was strange — we didn't have as much sea ice as this year." I wonder if it's an effect of global warming. "I don't know if it's just a cycle," she says, "but something is changing. And up here in Svalbard we really see it."

In this wintry Eden, ice is everything. Over two-thirds of Svalbard is made up of the stuff, and the islands' spectacular wildlife revolves around it. There isn't a single tree here, and not the faintest smudge of green can be seen on this vast canvas of white. But in the summer, as if by magic, the snowy cloak is shed to reveal a more colourful scene, punctuated by purple lousewort and saxifrage.

We descend carefully, and cross the ice to the shores of Tempelfjord itself. Once distant dots from the hilltop, the icebergs are much larger now, and there are hundreds of them, all different sizes and shades of white, sitting like



THERE'S A SPECIFIC BUREAUCRATIC PROCEDURE SHOULD ANYONE HAVE TO SHOOT A POLAR BEAR IN SELF-DEFENCE

gravestones off the shoreline; some ugly, some beautiful. Glancing quickly, the cumbersome clumps could, just for a moment, be polar bears.

Marte waves us to a halt. She edges ahead alone, circling the area like a falcon, before beckoning us forward. As we park up, she explains: "I needed to check this place for bears. They can leap out of the water pretty quickly here." She slings the rifle over her shoulder, telling us to stay near and not to get too close to the water's edge.

The government here makes no secret of the danger of polar bears; there are plenty of warning posters, it's law that anyone leaving towns and villages must take a gun with them, and there's a specific bureaucratic procedure should anyone have to shoot a bear in self-defence. Deadly carnivores or not, they are Svalbard's shameless poster children; the fuzzy beasts appear on nearly every piece of merchandise I see.

Regardless, I'm drawn to the shoreline, ignoring the risk of an ursine ambush to admire the cubist chunks of ice like works in a gallery. The peace is interrupted abruptly; our attention grabbed by a splash somewhere ahead. A seal, perhaps — or more likely, a fish — but my inner child longs for the main





attraction, hoping a hulking white beast will heave himself out of the water and shake himself dry on the ice. No such luck. Nothing appears.

"Hvalross!" shouts Brita Gundersen, another guide, pointing to a far-off lump of ice. "Walrus!" There's a flutter of excitement as we realise her well-trained eyes are right. Through the binoculars I make out a lolloping brown blob on the ice — a mother basking in the sunlight. Beside her, bobbing up and down in the water, is her calf, desperately trying to keep up, doing his utmost to copy his mum. It's no polar bear, but a pair of walruses come a close second.

We take lunch in the shelter of the trapper's lodge, a lone red-and-white cabin close to the water. Dotted around the islands, these humble little sheds are outposts for hunters (called trappers up here) to bed down and keep warm when out in the wilderness. They're startlingly isolated, and completely at the mercy of the elements, but strangely rather charming — humans' tiny stake in this land claimed by nature. As we tuck into instant couscous and steaming cups of purple saft (fruit cordial), Marte tells us the story of this little station: it was home to a famous trapper in the 1920s and his small family, but his wife slowly went mad and he divorced her, then moved away and remarried. I wonder if the dark, cold winters drove her mad. "Maybe," says Marte indifferently. "We can't be certain."

Well, I deduce — it was either the winters or her husband.

We zoom off, the sun now at its deepest and most lustrous, spreading its honey-coloured warmth across Svalbard for the last few moments of the day. It's dazzling, in fact; I can only vaguely make out the scooter in front of me as we glide across the sun-drenched ice, my vision worsened still by the billowing wisps of snow. Soon the light will disappear, cloaking the islands in an usual violet-blue darkness. But we're not returning to civilisation just yet; we wind our way through a frozen gorge before the rock faces either side open up to reveal a mighty pillar of frozen water, which, ordinarily, would have tumbled down the rock face, shattering the silence I have become accustomed to. Now, bound by winter's powerful spell, Eskerfossen waterfall is fast asleep. I go to touch it, before I'm warned off by Brita. The icy ground is riddled with cracks and, more menacingly, sabre-like icicles hang precariously above our heads. Obediently, I step back. When it's this powerful, you don't mess with winter. **CONNOR MCGOVERN**

BASECAMP EXPLORER offers two days of snowmobiling, with one night at North Pole Camp from NOK 9,990 (£953), full board, or from NOK 6,990 (£667) if you don't want to drive your own snowmobile. *visitnorway.com basecampexplorer.com*

IMAGES: VISITNORWAY; RENATO GRANIERI





CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Looking out across the wilderness to Isfjorden; a snowmobile; a walrus off the coast of Svalbard

WE'RE NOT RETURNING TO CIVILISATION JUST YET; WE WIND OUR WAY THROUGH A GORGE BEFORE THE ROCK FACE OPENS UP TO REVEAL A MIGHTY PILLAR OF FROZEN WATER



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These boots have just become available in the UK. Mountain environments require a good pair of rugged, waterproof boots and the Danner Light is just that. RRP: £308. *danner.com*

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MAMMUT AVALANCHE KIT

Never go into the backcountry without an avalanche kit — this avalanche bag, probe and super-lightweight shovel plus transceiver are essential items for anyone venturing into the unknown. *mammut.com*

BARRYVOX S (£330), Mammut's new avalanche beacon, has a powerful search facility and is easy, simple and intuitive to handle.

ALUGATOR LIGHT (£60) is a strong, robust shovel that weighs less than a can of Coke.

PROBE 240 SHORT (£50), a lightweight avalanche probe made from durable aluminium, has integrated telescopic locking for easy use with gloves.

Put it all in the **FLIP REMOVABLE AIRBAG 3.0** (£525), which has an ice axe and trekking poles, and is compatible with a hydration system.

THE PULL OF THE WILD



LOOKING FOR AN EXTRA SHOT OF ADRENALIN WHILE YOU SKI? JUST ADD A HORSE — AND FOCUS

"Bring the front of your skis together in a pizza shape to slow down", my ski instructor Jacamo had told me. I keep repeating it over and over in my head. It all seemed so exhilaratingly easy on the nursery slopes of St Moritz ski school that morning, surrounded by toppling kids. I'd mastered the basics of skiing relatively easily in three hours of training, and had a bit of a thrill taking a blue run back down the mountain. But now the moment of truth had come. Could a complete novice skier take on skijoring?

Relatively unknown in the UK, skijoring is a Scandinavian sport where a skier is pulled along on the flat by a horse, dog or occasionally a snowmobile. Think of waterskiing, but on snow, and with a horse, not a boat, providing the propulsion. I made the mistake of watching some YouTube videos of the professionals before leaving home — expert skiers being pulled at high speed, performing impressive jumps over snow ramps, grabbing point-gaining rings from mid air and weaving in and out of obstacles, like a terrifyingly high-adrenalin, winter version of Super Mario.

It quickly becomes clear that the tourist version is a little less hardcore. No jumps or breakneck speed for us. Instead, we've got jockeys controlling our horses and our course is two straights connected by semi-circular turns on a flat piece of land next to Lake Silvaplana in St Moritz. If I'm going to go down, at least it's in beautiful surroundings. Craggy, snow-dusted peaks form a dramatic valley, bathed in the crystal light of a late-winter sun. It's all quintessentially Alpine.

We get matched with our horses and one of the more experienced skiers volunteers to go first. They set off at a gallop and he carves his way around two perfect turns before coming to a graceful stop with a bow in front of some onlookers. Two other long-time skiers have slightly less luck with spectacular falls, but arrive back uninjured. I don't feel encouraged but it's my turn nonetheless.

The jockey takes it mercifully easy and we trot off at jogging pace. The rope slackens and snaps taut again as I struggle to maintain a consistent speed, but I make it to the end of the first straight in an upright position before awkwardly walking my skis around to point in the right direction.

I spend the next couple of runs getting my confidence up, gradually going faster and faster. By the time my final turn arrives





I MADE THE MISTAKE OF WATCHING SOME YOUTUBE VIDEOS OF THE PROFESSIONALS BEFORE LEAVING HOME...



IMAGES: 4CORNERS; ALAMY

I'm starting to get into it and my jockey asks if I want to take it up a notch. I try to look confident as I nod yes. We fly off at a gallop and the end of the first straight and my first corner fast approach. Can I remember enough of my lesson to hold it together? The horse stops and starts turning on the spot as I fly past and into the curve. The rope goes slack before snapping taut again as I cling on, leaning into my skis to carve around in a passable semi-circle. The horse takes off again, and the kick back on the rope almost sends me flying, but I manage to hang on.

With adrenalin pumping and feeling delighted with myself I let out a little cheer. It turns out a total beginner can handle skijoring, and not just manage but enjoy it as well. Maybe I'll even manage a triumphant bow at the end. The second and final turn approaches. It feels like we're flying, but buoyed by my success so far I go for it. I pull a perfect turn and crack a smile, feeling elated, but my joy quickly turns to terror. I'm going too fast. "Make a pizza! Make a pizza! Make a pizza!" I scream internally but it's too late and I crash into a barrier.

SEAMUS MCDERMOTT

ABOVE: Crap da Sass Castle on the frozen Lake Silvaplana, Switzerland
LEFT: Skijoring with a jockey

The Kulm Hotel St Moritz organises skijoring packages upon request from CHF350 (£271) per person per hour. Accommodation at the Kulm Hotel starts from CHF675 (£523) for two people sharing a double room on a half-board basis. Fly with Swiss Airlines from the UK & Ireland to Zurich or Geneva from £54 one way. *kulm.com swiss.com swisstravelsystem.com myswitzerland.com*

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SNOW FOR BEGINNERS

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HOW TO DO IT: Ten nights in Whistler start from £1,165 per person including accommodation at the Tantalus Resort Lodge, return flights from London and bus transfers or hire car. *skisafari.com*

LEARN TO BUILD AN IGLOO IN JAPAN

Take a break from the slopes and spend a couple of hours learning how to make bricks from hard-pack snow and construct a traditional Inuit igloo. Afterwards, sit in your igloo and enjoy a cup of local tea.
HOW TO DO IT: Ski Safari offers seven nights at the Always Niseko from £1,695 per person, including international flights and return transfers. *skisafari.com*

ICE CLIMBING FRANZ JOSEF GLACIER

Take a helicopter ride up to Franz Josef Glacier on the west coast of New Zealand's South Island for a day's ice climbing. You'll receive tuition from expert guides and on your return you can indulge in the local hot pools. Franz Josef Glacier Guides is owned by Ngai Tahu, the local South Island Maori tribe and all profits go directly to the community, helping to fund Maori education, language and culture.
HOW TO DO IT: A one-day ice-climbing excursion with Franz Josef Guides costs NZ$525 (£285). Return flights from Heathrow to Queenstown start from £1,324. *airnewzealand.co.nz*

TRANS-SIBERIAN RAILWAY

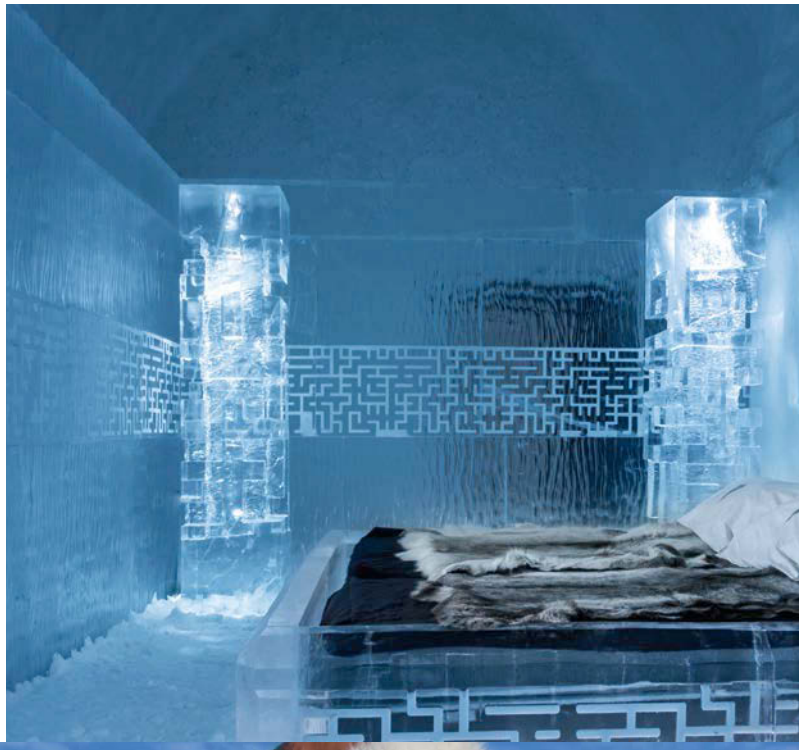
Take the ultimate 15-day luxury train journey across Siberia from Vladivostok to Moscow aboard the Golden Eagle. Tour both these cities and many places in between, including Vladimir and Suzdal, Yekaterinburg, Novosibirsk, Irkutsk, Lake Baikal and Ulaanbaatar, enjoying dinners on board and traditional Russian music in the piano bar.
HOW TO DO IT: The Baltic Travel Company offers an eastbound departure (Moscow-Vladivostok) from 21 February-7 March, or a westbound departure (Vladivostok-Moscow) from 5-19 March, priced from £10,295 per person. *baltictravelcompany.co.uk*



GUESTS LEARN HOW THE EXTREME ENVIRONMENT ENHANCES THE FLAVOUR OF VODKA AND MINIMISES THE BURN OF THE ALCOHOL

ABOVE: Heli hikers, Franz Josef Glacier, New Zealand

IMAGE: GETTY







FIRE SIGNALS LIFE, OPTIMISM, AND OFFERS A BLAZING TWO FINGERS UP TO MOTHER NATURE, WHO CAN BE A HARSH MISTRESS IN THESE PARTS





OFF-GRID & OFF-MAP

FIRE, FISHING AND THE FOOTHILLS: LEARN HOW TO SURVIVE IN THE SWEDISH WILDS SURROUNDING THE FAMOUS ICEHOTEL

Survival instincts? It turns out that unless you have the skills to back them up, they're largely useless. It's -11C, a far from perilous temperature by Swedish Arctic standards, but a fire is the order of the day nonetheless. That's what you do, you see, here in the Swedish boreal forest, snow or shine, midsummer or in the bluest depths of midwinter. Fire signals life, optimism, and offers a blazing two fingers up to Mother Nature, who can be a harsh mistress in these parts.

Building a fire is also a basic survival skill, one I'm aiming to learn in an afternoon's crash course. Only I've busted several flints in my attempts to ignite papery scrolls of birch bark kindling, and my arms are getting seriously fatigued from all the elbow work. The upside? At least all the frantic flapping about means I'm keeping warm.

"Do you know about the man who survived for 70 days in a snow drift, in his car?" asks my guide, Robert Lundgren, cheerily. "All you need is shelter and water, and you can go on for weeks."

In Robert's case, producing this is not easier said than done. He's already found us a shelter of sorts, in the lee of a towering pine, and two sharp strikes of his flint produces a spark, then smoke, then a roaring fire fed by 'crow's twigs' (the small, dry, lower branches of the spruce tree). Pretty soon he's brewing tea — melted ice with spruce fronds — and we settle back on the reindeer skins he magics up from his backpack, sipping while sighing at the wonder of it all. Snow-shrouded skirts of trees, blousy white boughs and knee-deep drifts roll away to the bank of the frozen Torne River below us. All's silent apart from the crack and spit of the fire.

The river runs from the Arctic's Scandinavian Mountains 500km south to the frozen Bay of Bothnia, a wild expanse that in winter shows few signs of life but is, in fact, a source of civilisation. And here in the little Sami village of Jukkasjärvi

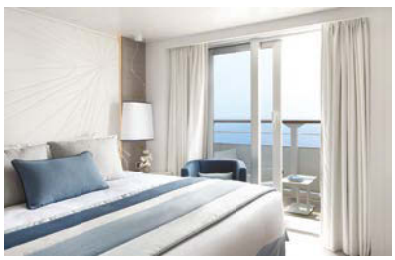
FROM LEFT: Art Suite Oh Deer at the Ice Hotel; ice fishing; Don't Get Lost suite, Icehotel; Enoks camp

IMAGES: TOMMY ALATALO, MATTIAS STYREFORS & ASAF KLIGER/ ICEHOTEL.COM; CARL-JOHAN UTSI









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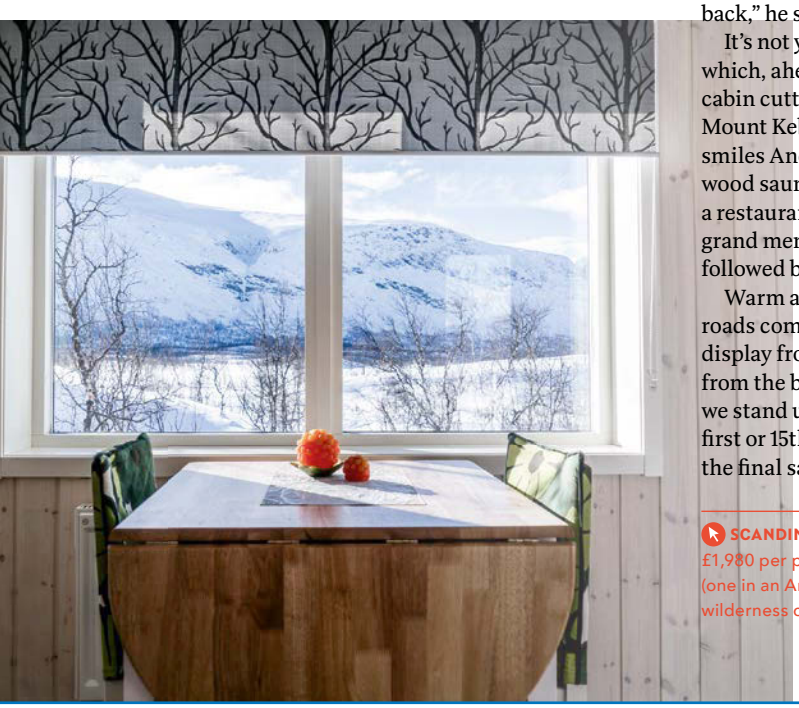


Fire fed by 'crow's twigs' to brew tea made of melted ice and spruce fronds
BELOW: Snowy view from the window of a wilderness cabin

are its very building blocks. Each winter the Torne gives birth to both art and accommodation in the shape of the Icehotel. Blocks of 'snice' (river ice and snow) are crafted by an international army of hard-hat-wearing, chainsaw-wielding sculptors, their creations drawing tens of thousands of tourists to this tiny one-church village, to overnight in what is essentially a sub-zero art gallery. Such has been the success of this bucket-list novelty, one season isn't enough and now sister Icehotel 365, aided by clever insulation, solar power and turf roofs, offers a -5c arty igloo experience year round.

After a somewhat surreal night in 365's Don't Get Lost Art Suite (bed positioned in the centre of an ice-carved maze), I'm ready to get lost in that boreal forest again. A couple of hours snowmobiling into the hinterland on a group 'safari', I'm thus rewarded. We follow almost invisible trails through narrow forest tracks, and once I remember to loosen my grip on the handlebars and trust the snowmobile to find its groove (there's rudimentary instruction for the uninitiated), this is a brilliantly mindless pleasure. Our little cavalcade of six Ski-doos judders across tiny wooden bridges forging almost iridescent turquoise blue rivers, out onto white, wind-flattened sheets of lake, the engines' growl flushing out pairs of moose and calf that cast comical skinny-legged silhouettes against fast-impending boreal night.

There's perch, grayling and pike, too, revealed to us during a fishing tutorial led by local hosts Andreas Sarri and his father, Nils. This unflappable pair produce a mammoth bore drill out of their trailer to cut metre-deep holes into the ice, where we sit with basic line and bait waiting for a bite. One of us gets a catch: a three-inch perch deemed "food for the foxes" by Andreas. "It's always good to give something back," he says with the calm of a man who knows there's a warm oven nearby.



It's not yet evening but the Nordic sky has cast its eerie winter half-light out of which, ahead of our roving snowmobiles rises Enoks camp, its central wooden cabin cutting an elegant Sami-tent-like shape against the slate grey backdrop of Mount Kebnekaise. "Sweden's highest mountain seemed a good spot for a camp," smiles Andreas. It's a modest term for somewhere that comes with a traditional wood sauna, five tidy en suite cabins, and that central Sami-style building, housing a restaurant with vaulted ceilings. The latter is a fitting setting for a surprisingly grand menu of lightly smoked reindeer carpaccio, pink strips of reindeer steak followed by a delicate panna cotta with cloudberry jelly.

Warm and well fed, it's hard to remember we're off-grid, off-map (no public roads come within several miles of Enoks), somewhere deep in the Arctic. A timely display from the Northern Lights provides a hair-raising reminder, summoning us from the beds we've only just fallen into. Scrambling back into thermals and boots, we stand under its white-green, shifting, smoky display — and whether this is a first or 15th experience of the aurora, all of us are silenced. The Arctic always has the final say. **SARAH BARRELL**

SCANDINAVIA ONLY has a three-night Icehotel and Overnight Wilderness Experience, from £1,980 per person including return flights from Heathrow, transfers, two nights at Icehotel, B&B (one in an Art Suite, one in a 'warm room'), survival skills session, one night full board at Enoks wilderness cabins, ice-fishing and self-drive snowmobile transfers. *scandinaviaonly.co.uk*

TRAVELLING ON SNOW

MOTORBIKING THROUGH THE URALS

Ride an antique Russian Ural sidecar motorcycle across Lake Baikal. Competitors take part in the Baikal Ice Run in pairs.
HOW TO DO IT: Next year's adventure runs 12-24 March 2018. Entry fee is £3,795 per team of two, plus a £1,000 refundable deposit for the bike. This excludes flights, food and board, visas, insurance, cold weather gear, fuel and repairs. Competitors must raise a minimum of £1,000 for charity. *theadventurists.com*

SKI TOURING IN AFGHANISTAN

You don't need any previous experience of ski touring to join this trip to Bamian in central Afghanistan. Skiers will get untouched powder routes, and visit the world's largest standing Buddha statues.
HOW TO DO IT: The trip runs from 17-26 February 2018, priced from US$2,450 (£1,860) including accommodation, some meals, ground transport and internal flights and guiding. Flights to Kabul excluded. *anotherworldadventures.com*

FAT BIKING IN GRAND TETON NATIONAL PARK

Take a bike tour around the Wild West ski resort of Jackson Hole, USA. Jump on a bike with five-inch tyres and have a local guide show you around snow-packed trails in the Grand Teton National Park.
HOW TO DO IT: A week in Jackson Hole costs from £1,228 per person with Sno, including flights, transfers and accommodation at Parkway Inn, B&B. A fat bike day tour for two costs $400 (£303). *sno.co.uk tetonmtbike.com*

IMAGES: SARAH BARRELL; CARL-JOHAN UTSI



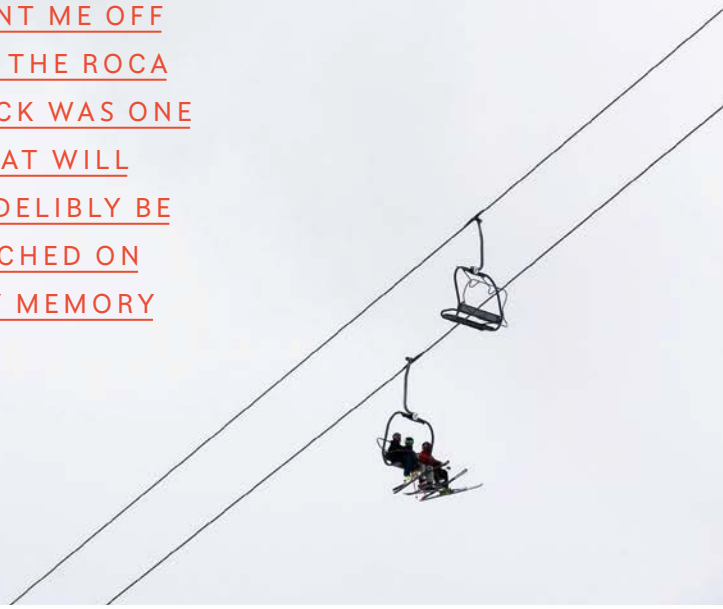
SUPERSTAR SKI CAMP

OLYMPIANS AND PRO-SKIERS HAVE TEAMED UP TO RUN TRAINING SESSIONS IN CHILE THAT ARE STRICTLY NOT FOR NOVICES



FROM LEFT: Coach Wendy Fisher gives Eddy Healey some pointers before dropping in; Noah Bartsch skis down Garganta; Sam Coffey walks a ridge at the top of the Super C couloir; a group rides the Plateau lift on a misty day





CODY IS NEW TO COACHING AND TO THE CAMP, AND THE DAY HE SENT ME OFF UP THE ROCA JACK WAS ONE THAT WILL INDELIBLY BE ETCHED ON MY MEMORY

"Wait until it has stopped completely, and then get off one at a time — the person with the rope gets off last!" warns Cody Townsend, as the lift propels us into orbit, hurtling vertically upwards over steep, mogulled terrain that has me clinging on for dear life. A shave under 700m later, just as my nerves can take no more, it stops abruptly, spitting us backwards and I let go, in a sort of snowplough on a 45-degree slope while trying not to fall over.

It's my first ride on the Roca Jack, a type of button lift five people ride at the same time, unique to the ski resort of Portillo in Chile. I'm here attending a Superstars Ski Camp run by one of the world's best big mountain skiers, Chris Davenport, and some of his mates.

Riding the Roca Jack seemed way more daunting than skiing with any of the superstar coaches, despite their pedigree. As well as Chris there's multiple World Extreme Ski champion and Olympian Wendy Fisher; Canadian Mike Douglas, the man who invented twin-tip skis and in the process made skiing cool again; Ingrid Backstrom, one of the world's most successful (and fearless) professional female big mountain skiers and, of course, Cody Townsend.

Cody is a huge name right now — thanks to straight-lining 'The Crack', an almost vertical, impossibly narrow chute in Alaska's Tordrillos Mountain Range in 2014, a feat that landed him on various news channels and earned him millions of views on YouTube.

Cody is new to coaching and to the camp, and the day he sent me off up the Roca Jack was one that will indelibly be etched on my memory. Not because I got to watch Cody ski in his flawless, aggressive and downright awesome style first hand, nor because he regaled us with tales of his hell-raising as a teenager, almost being kicked out of the Junior Olympic team for picking up a girl the night before he raced (and precociously winning the following day). Not even because I spent an evening partying with him. But because he stood at the top of a run and said to fellow camper Anthony: "Yeah, ski just like that, only ski faster, ski harder and ski better." He was joking, but it was gold.

IMAGES: JESSE HOFFMAN

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Adventures

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IMAGE: JESSE HOFFMAN

LEFT: Sam Coffey makes his way to the top of the Super C couloir. Hotel Portillo is roughly 4,000-5,000 vertical feet below him in the distance

'I'VE NEVER HAD ANYONE TURN UP WHO IS TOO FIT FOR PORTILLO,' EXPLAINS CHRIS WHEN WE DISCUSS HIS EMAILS BEFORE CAMP, IN WHICH HE APPEALED TO US TO GET AS FIT AS POSSIBLE

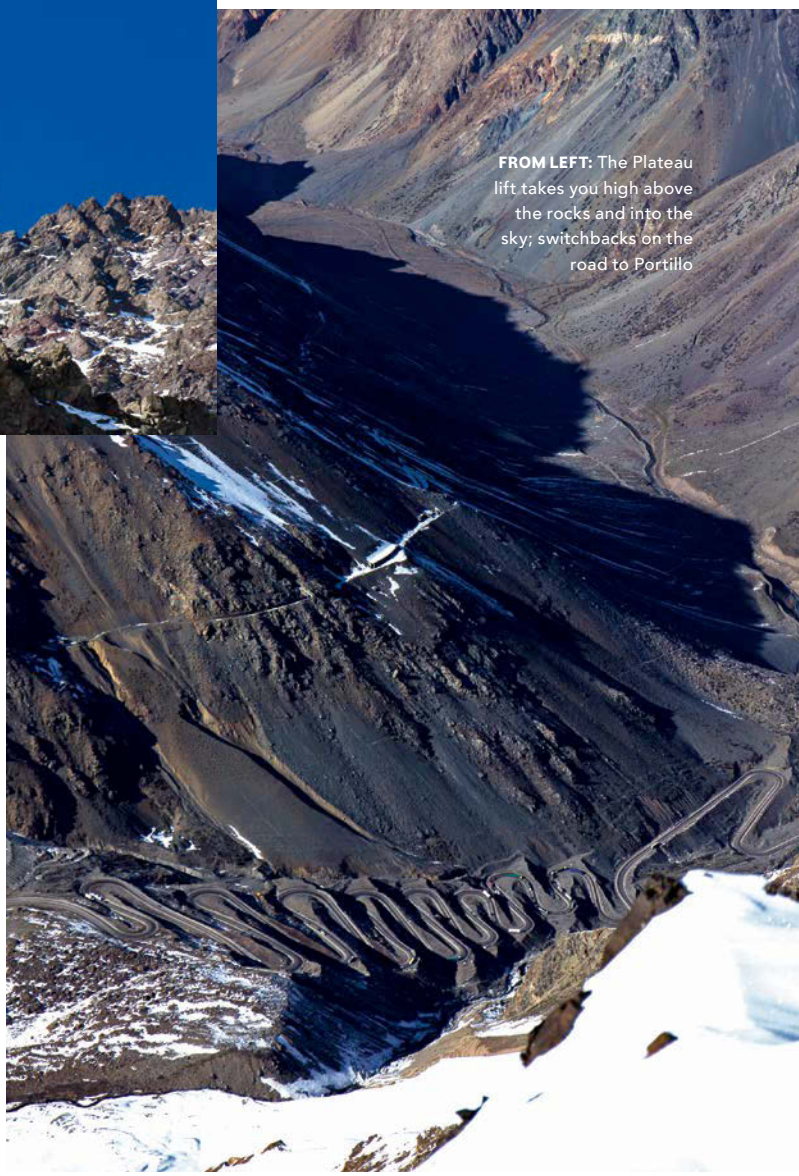
Chris Davenport has been running his Superstars Camp in Portillo for 14 years, and the area normally receives around eight metres of snow dumped in several storms through the season. This year, however, Portillo has just suffered the worst snowpack of the past 35 years, so Chris has had a couple of skiers drop out. This leaves nearly 30 of us to ski in small groups with each coach — many repeat campers among the crowd drawn from the US, Brazil and the UK, aged from 12 to 71. It's a week for good skiers who want to be challenged, and it's not for the fainthearted.

"I've never had anyone turn up who is too fit for Portillo," explains Chris when we discuss his emails in the weeks before camp, in which he appealed to all attendees to get as fit as possible and lose any excess 'off-season' weight.

Portillo is high. Set at nearly 3,000m above sea level in the Valparaíso region of the Andes on the Uspallata Pass, it straddles one of the main routes from Chile to Argentina. While you're riding the Juncalilo chairlift from the bottom of the ski area, huge trucks climb the switchbacks below, transporting freight from Los Andes to Mendoza.

Portillo's ski area itself is relatively small, with less than a dozen lifts and around the same number of pistes, but it's





FROM LEFT: The Plateau lift takes you high above the rocks and into the sky; switchbacks on the road to Portillo

some of the best, steepest lift-accessed terrain you could hope for. This being a bad snow year we don't get the usual opportunity to hike up and access some of the tougher lines — like the world-famous Super C couloir, a 2.5-hour hike from above the Roca Jack that rewards skiers with fabulous views of the distant Aconcagua and Laguna Del Inca — but we still ski hard, running through drills and gliding down spring-like corn snow.

Halfway through the week the snow gods answer our prayers with a foot of powder that gives us all that's needed to enjoy the steep, wide powder bowls on either side of the valley in which Portillo sits: El Estadio, Travesía and Kilometro Lanzada (where several world speed skiing records have been set) and Shane's run, short but fun, and named after the late, great Shane McConkey, a founding Superstars coach. After a day on the slopes, the group hits the bar, the hot tub or the gym for a lesson on 360-degree tricks from Mike Douglas. Or a sneaky nap.

Being at Portillo is like sailing on the most fabulous cruise ship. Three-course meals are served at lightning speed morning, noon and night; live music in the bar every evening followed by DJs in the disco into the night. The pace is relentless, the fun and camaraderie second to none.

On the last night, after prize giving (including GoPros for the most improved skier and a signed rock for the best crash), I got so carried away that I finally crawled into bed at 4.30am, two hours before I needed to get up for my flight.

Sitting in a taxi taking photos of Portillo as we descended those switchbacks back to Santiago, I actually shed a tear. I left skiing faster, harder and better (I hope) —and with 35 new Superstar friends. **ABIGAIL BUTCHER**

THE ULTIMATE TRAVEL COMPANY offers an 11-day trip to Chile including one-night B&B at Luciano K in Santiago, a city tour, transfers, and a seven-night package at Ski Portillo with ski passes and all meals. Prices start from £3,350 each and include direct flights to Santiago with British Airways. *theultimatetravelcompany.co.uk skiportillo.com*

ADVANCED SNOW

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HOW TO DO IT: N60 from IGO Adventures takes place 11-18 March 2018, from £5,150 per person. *igoadventures.com*

ICE DIVING ON LAC DU LOU IN VAL THORENS

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HOW TO DO IT: A day trip to ice dive on Lac du Lou costs €150 (£133), including snowshoe/hike to the lake, lunch and ice diving. *sno.co.uk*

HELI-SKIING IN ICELAND

Enjoy a private helicopter ride while skiing the Fljot Valley on the Troll Peninsula in Northern Iceland. Expert guides will pick your runs and it's up to you how many drops you can manage.
HOW TO DO IT: A four-day heli-skiing trip based at Deplar Farm starts from £8,700 per person, including private concierge, guide, most gear, in-house meals and drinks, housekeeping and airport transfers. *elevenexperience.com*

DOG SLEDDING IN GREENLAND

Explore the glaciers, mountains and icy fjords and icebergs of Ammassalik Island in East Greenland on a five-day dog sledding expedition.
HOW TO DO IT: Priced from €3,559 (£3,175) per person, including flights from Reykjavik to Kulusuk, a return helicopter flight from Kulusuk to Tasiilaq and accommodation with full board. *anotherworldadventures.com*

IMAGES: JESSE HOFFMAN

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Life on Mars

At first glance, Namibia's sweltering desert hinterland seems to be a dead zone — but look closer and you'll see life not only persists here, it often thrives

WORDS **STEPHANIE CAVAGNARO**
PHOTOGRAPHS **SLAWEK KOZDRAS**





I've found the valley of the shadow of death: a vast, rusting necropolis of a desert, fringed with hulking terracotta tombstones of sand, which bake beneath an abrasive mid-morning sun. It's a place squeezed of life; where a burning sky and the dunes beneath it are wrapped in an intimate *tête-à-tête*.

The heat is bone dry, and savage when it reaches my lungs as I lumber up a steep dune. It's a thankless task: each step sends me slipping backwards in a limb-flailing dance as an avalanche of sand plummets down either side of me.

"Top of the world," breathes Mida, a fellow traveller, once we finally reach a plateau. "Look at those little people down there," she says gazing at the tawny canvas of Sossusvlei. I've climbed a leg-numbing 600ft up Dune 45, where a dying expanse of ochre stretches away from my feet: endless rolling red mountains of sand undulate like a shark's gills, rising up towards razor-sharp ridges. The sun bathes half the dunes in a deep velvety shadow — and above it all, a hot air balloon hangs listless in the heat, silhouetted by a crisp cobalt sky.

It's not just the colour that makes this austere place feel otherworldly. Fairy circles creep across a yellow, grass-streaked valley, each surreal polka-dot barren of vegetation. And then there's the macabre Deadvlei, a cracked white clay pan pierced with ghostly skeletons of petrified camel thorn trees, their charred black branches twisted and scorched, thirsting for water from parched ground that was nourished by the Tsauchab River 700 years ago.

The Namib Desert certainly feels Martian. And, unlike in the shifting Sahara, the dunes here are permanent. "Take away civilisation," says Paul, my affable guide, adjusting his glasses, "and you see there's not much chance for survival here."

Paul, a South African with a shock of white hair who wears an Indiana Jones palette of tans and browns, knows this arid country well — he lived here for 10 years during the 1966-89 Namibian War of Independence. Paul is leading 14 of us on a 10-day National Geographic Journeys with G Adventures road trip across Namibia. We'll take in over 1,200 miles, from the desiccated deserts in the south to the wildlife oasis of Etosha National Park in the north.

We'd driven here from the capital, Windhoek, where civilisation quickly gave way to a dusty expanse of shrubby bushveld. The landscape is pocked with aloe vera plants, upright like soldiers; miles of bristly acacia thorns dangling with weaver nests; and sandstone granite outcrops. But we haven't seen another human being — with just 2.5 million people occupying its 318,259 square miles, Namibia has one of the lowest population densities in the world.

The further south we drive, the higher the mountains rise — jagged behemoths wrinkled like an elephant's skin, covered with random white limestone lines: the ghosts of waterfalls. Mostly, though, there's a feeling of unbounded nothingness.

Yet this emptiness isn't accompanied by stillness. As we drive along, I'm kept alert by what Paul calls the Namibian shuffle. "Ninety percent of Namibia's roads are dirt," he says over the harsh ting of rocks smacking the belly of the coach, which vibrates so violently it seems like it might shake itself into a million tiny pieces. The ravages of the road have proved too much for many tyres, it seems — entire cars have been left abandoned mid-journey to rust in the sun.

Every 10 minutes or so, a 4x4 will tremble past, wrapping us in a thick haze that hangs like mist. And along these sooty stretches we sometimes see people. We shudder past a goat herder in the desolate bush, who waves as we pass.

"You have to be a different type of person to live here," says Paul, as he clocks the lone farmer, adding that living in this area means no electricity — instead solar power or batteries — and the nearest shop

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Locust, Namib Desert; dead acacias, Deadvlei, Namib-Naukluft National Park; climbing Dune 45, Soussusvlei

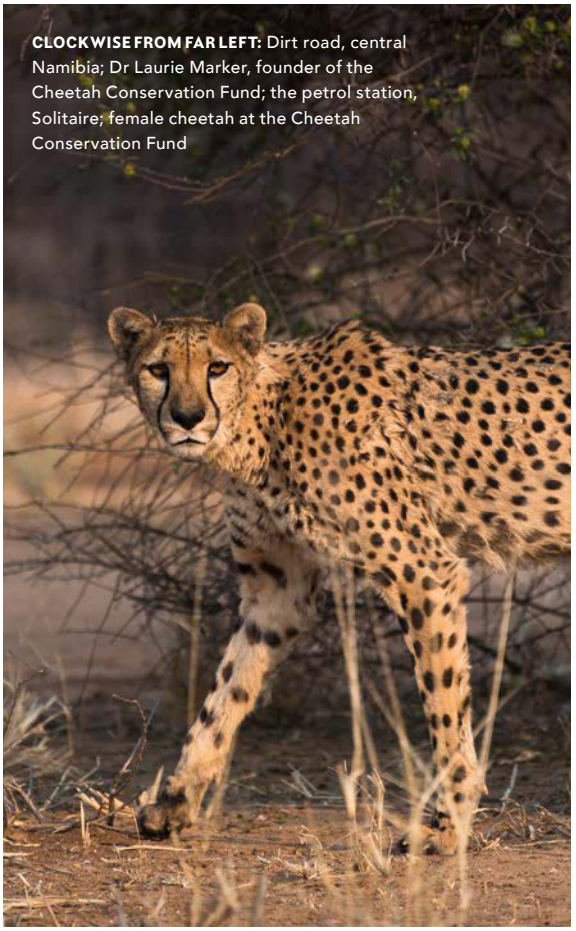


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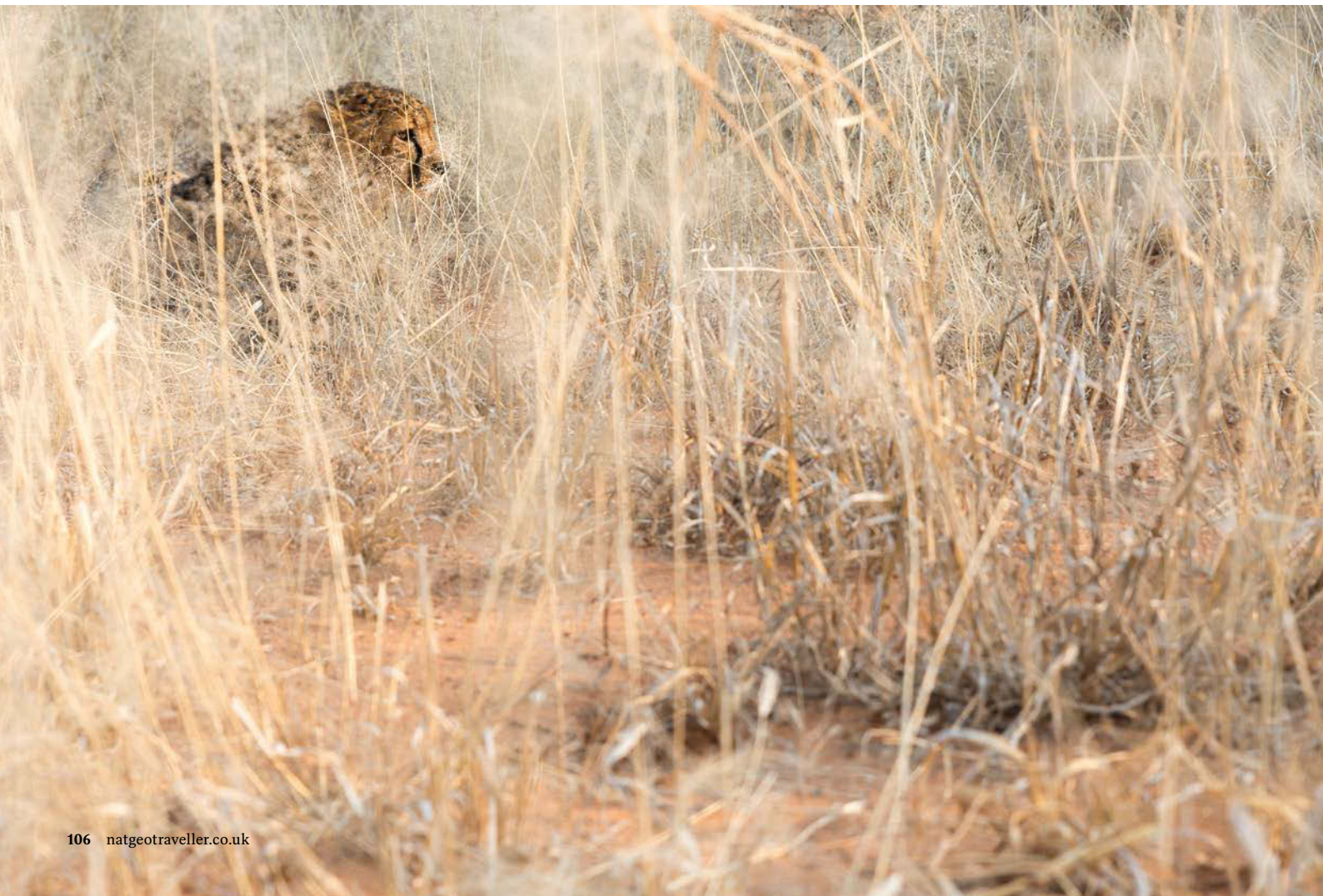






CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: Dirt road, central Namibia; Dr Laurie Marker, founder of the Cheetah Conservation Fund; the petrol station, Solitaire; female cheetah at the Cheetah Conservation Fund


SOLITAIRE
• REFRESHMENTS
• RESTROOMS
• BOTTLE STORE
• PETROL



is an hour's walk away. "You don't get sick here, you don't get bitten by a snake — you get a pen and paper to write down your last will and testament," he warns, gazing at the beige terrain.

On our way south, we stop at Solitaire — a tiny settlement with the only petrol station between Sossusvlei and the coast, a fuel-draining three-hour drive away. Its entrance is flanked with old rusting vehicles being claimed by the sand. The town rises up from the dust like a mirage. "It's quite an oasis," remarks Paul, as we head into Moose McGregor's Desert Bakery for apple strudel.

After fuelling up both our bellies and the bus, we head back out into the thirsty plains, where the shrubs seem to have been choked out of existence, save some tufts of fragrant wild sage. "Miles and miles and miles of no people — just the road," muses Paul. "You can breathe here."

Making tracks

Ironically, in this barren hinterland, life isn't always clinging on to existence — sometimes it even flourishes. For example, Namibia now has the world's largest wild cheetah population, despite a global decline. Furthermore, it's steadily increasing. "One hundred years ago, there used to be 100,000 cheetahs worldwide. Today, there are only about 7,000 — we've lost a huge amount," says Dr Laurie Marker, during our 'unique experience' visit to the Cheetah Conservation Fund (CCF), a global field research and education facility dedicated to saving the wild cheetah.

"A cheetah brought me here to Namibia in 1977," Laurie tells our group, showing us a photo of the predator. "Her name was Kayanne, and I taught her how to hunt." The experience inspired Laurie, a native Californian, to found the CCF in 1991 — a time when "farmers were killing cheetahs like flies," she adds.

In addition to human-wildlife conflict, these big cats are grappling with habitat loss. "Our land has gone from an open savannah — and cheetahs are open-savannah animals — into thick thornbush," says Laurie. "Just imagine if your habitat has gone into this and you're a cheetah that runs at 70 miles an hour."

As part of the CCF's habitat-restoration programme, encroaching bush is harvested to make fuel logs. Other initiatives include educating local farmers about biodiversity conservation and placing guard dogs on farms, which has led to an impressive 80% reduction in livestock losses due to predation. "Our wildlife numbers have now increased," says Laurie. "And I think Namibia can probably say it's one of the only countries in the world that has seen an increase in its wildlife."

We hop into a 4x4 and head off to a nearby enclosure to see some of the orphaned and injured cats the CCF has rescued. My safari guide and driver is Ignatius, a friendly soul in a nut-brown Panama hat who grew up on the family farm near Otjiwarongo, a town 26 miles west of here, where his grandfather's trigger-happy approach to protecting livestock gave him an insight how biodiversity works. "When I came here, I saw that jackals — who are usually scavengers — were hunting on my grandfather's farm because he'd killed all the leopards, lions and cheetahs... so that's what kind of pushed me to say, OK, I want to learn more about these predators."

The fenced sanctuary entrance is adorned with cheetah-shaped signs, bearing the names of current residents, among them Polly, Nina and Sandy. Beyond the gate, a field of thorny acacias casts dark shadows and in the distance the rugged red Waterberg Plateau looms over the Kalahari plains. From the shade of an acacia steps a slender figure — she must be only 20ft from us as she stalks across an earth path; her shoulder blades sliding up and down with each step.

With the sun beating down on her, the cheetah stops dead in her tracks and, as she turns her attention towards us, I notice she's missing an eye. She contemplates us long enough for me to admire the detail of her spotted pelage and the black, tear-like streaks on her face.





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Vintage car, Solitaire; Slowtown Coffee Roasters, Swakopmund; Anja, a barista at Slowtown Coffee Roasters; female cheetah hiding in the grass, Cheetah Conservation Fund



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"One girl, she can occupy about five to six farms, which is her home range. That's about 2,000 square kilometres," says Ignatius, raising his eyebrows. "Five to six farms is a vast amount of land." As Amani disappears beneath a tree, Ignatius starts the vehicle to the vocal displeasure of a grey go-away-bird sporting a mohican.

Beyond a few more acacias, we find another feline seeking respite from the relentless 37C Namibian oven in the cool shade. As we approach, she raises her head and cocks her ears back with anticipation. Ignatius tells me her name is Solo; she's a 14-year-old who was rescued from a sheep farm as a cub.

"We're not allowed to breed in a captive environment in Namibia, so all of these cats are rescued from farms or even from people's homes," Ignatius explains. "They're one of the cats that can get quickly habituated to human presence. That's why there are so many cheetahs as pets nowadays — especially in the Arab Emirates, where it's a huge, huge problem. Human and wildlife conflict will never end, but it can definitely be improved." And at least in Namibia, people like Laurie and Ignatius are carrying the torch.

Feast & famine

A few days earlier, we head north from Swakopmund on smooth, salt-paved roads. Without much notice, the road eases into Damaraland: a mountainscape of green-streaked scrubland, dried-up riverbeds and 10ft termite nests contorted into misshapen conical heaps. This region looks wild and forgotten, but it's always sustained life. It was once the stomping ground of the San people, who engraved animals and humans into rock around 6,000 years ago at Twyfelfontein, an open-air gallery three hours east of the shipwreck-studded Skeleton Coast.

Semi-nomadic tribes still call this wilderness home. On dusty roadsides we find the Himba, who are the colour of the desert — due to the blend of animal fat, herbs and ochre they rub on their skin to protect it from the sun. "The men are only allowed to wash with water once during the year — for a ceremony — because there's so little available," explains Paul. Instead, the Himba clean themselves with fine sand and sweet-smelling plants that have been smoked on a fire.

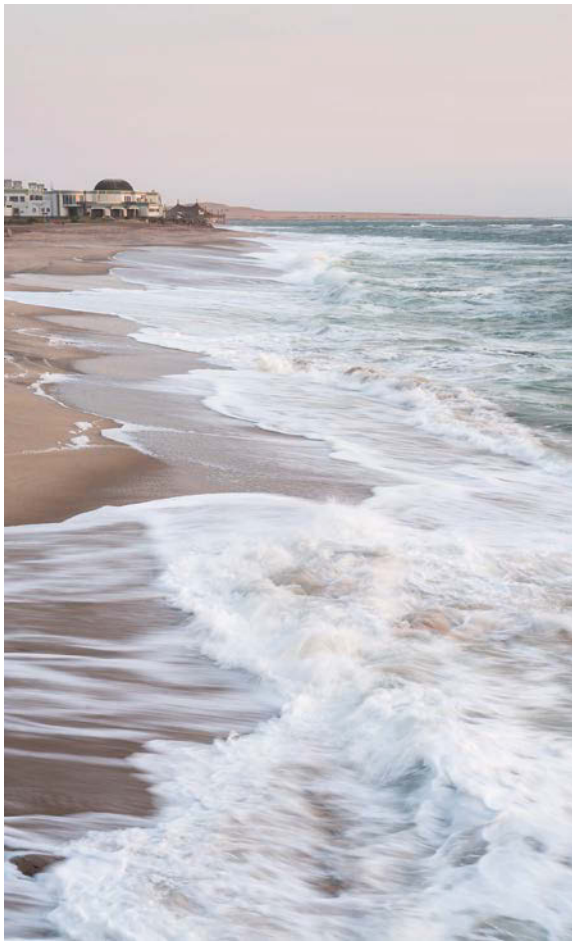
The Herero, meanwhile, cover up with voluminous Victorian-style dresses — adopted from their oppressors. "The Germans virtually wiped out the nation, and may have if it weren't for the First World War," Paul tells us. The tribe fought with such fury that nearly 80% of their population perished in just four years in the early 1900s.

Namibia's German heritage dates back to 1884, when it became a colony and was named South West Africa. Germany was stripped of its colonial territories after the First World War, but the nation's legacy remains in towns that dot the country — like Swakopmund, a seaside settlement complete with a *brauhaus* (restaurant-brewery), pastel-coloured German colonial-era buildings and Kuki's Pub, whose patrons dine on springbok schnitzel.

I pop into Slowtown Coffee Roasters, a slate-grey, bare-bulb cafe for a flat white. "Swakop is still very German," barista Anja tells me above the wailing of an espresso machine. "A lot of people speak German still, and we teach it at schools. But most people speak three languages in Namibia anyway."

Swakop is certainly different from the rest of the country — and not just because it feels like an outpost of Bavaria; it also seems to have swapped the oppressive desert heat for a near-constant blanket of mist. "Fog is the only water here most of the time," Paul tells me later, explaining that the fog belt runs 75 miles into the interior. "If the sea here were to have a warm current — like the Indian Ocean — it would've been a paradise, because the ground here is very fertile."

Later, we drive along dusty stretches towards Boesman's Farm. In the dry doldrums between Swakopmund and Sossusvlei, a 'Camping' sign slung with shoes is the only indication of this farm's existence.







FROM TOP: Atlantic breakers, Swakopmund; German colonial-era buildings on Daniel Tjongarero Avenue, Swakopmund; vintage stamps in one of Swakopmund's antique stores

We're here for a 'living desert' tour, and our barefoot guide, Frans, ushers us into a 4x4 for a drive across sand flecked with black magnetite and tickled by wispy grasses. He occasionally stops to show us flora bursting from this burnt land — like a desert plant known as 'ostrich salad', due to the African bird's predilection for it. Breaking off a stem, he explains it can survive five years without rain.

"This one is dead and angry," he says, "but if you put a little drop of water here" — he lets a dribble fall from a bottle — "it start smiling, see?" He shows us the plant as it slowly opens its pod wide, like the mouth of a hungry chick. "Very nice plant," he continues. "You go deep in the desert, you're stuck there, you don't have water, you don't have anything to eat — you try to eat a little of this plant, you can survive one or two days before you die," he says matter-of-factly.

Realistically, if you're unlucky enough to be lost here during the brutal summer, where temperatures can climb to a windless 55C, ostrich salad simply won't do. Instead, Frans grimly suggests your best option would be to look for the damara milk-bush. "Take one seed, after five minutes you get drunk like you're drinking wine. You take five or six more... Twenty-five minutes." He makes a raspberry sound with his lips. "Dead. Then you don't have to suffer."

With those sobering words on our minds, we follow Frans on foot across soft sand, dotted with wild sesame, stinkbush, sandpaper plants and camel thorn trees, whose roots can burrow 200ft down.

Frans plucks a head-standing beetle from the hot sand. It stays hydrated by collecting droplets of early-morning fog on its back. As he holds it, he tells us about some of the animals and insects that thrive here despite the lack of rain — 230 species of beetle, seven different spiders, scorpions, plus geckos and snake eagles.

"People say nothing can survive in the desert," he remarks, as the beetle feebly wiggles its legs. "But all the time, there's water going round, food going round." Frans places the beetle down and it scurries into the scorched earth. "This is paradise."





FROM TOP: Frans, a guide based at Boesman's Farm, central Namibia; Frans holding a head-standing beetle

ESSENTIALS

Getting there & around

South African Airways and British Airways fly from London to Windhoek via Johannesburg; Ethiopian Airlines via Addis Ababa. There are also flights to Windhoek via Doha from Edinburgh and Manchester with Qatar Airways.
flysaa.com ethiopianairlines.com qatarairways.com ba.com
AVERAGE FLIGHT TIME: 15h.
Car hire is advisable as many towns are hard to reach using public transport.

When to go

A good time to visit is May-September, when it's cooler (average 20C) and dry. During the rainy season (November-January), it can get very hot, with heavy rain. Evenings in the desert are often cold.

More info

CCF. *cheetah.org*
travelnamibia.co.uk
The Sheltering Desert, by Henno Martin. RRP: £8.79 (Two Books)
The Rough Guide to Namibia. RRP: £16.54



Where to stay

Le Mirage Resort & Spa.
mirage-lodge.com

How to do it

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC JOURNEYS WITH G ADVENTURES has a 10-day Wonders of Namibia trip from £1,849 per person. Includes nine nights' accommodation, nine breakfasts, two lunches and four dinners, transportation and all guides. *gadventures.co.uk*



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THE EDGE OF LAND AND SEA

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHS **DANIEL ALLEN**

ON THE ROMANIAN COAST, AT THE EASTERN LIMIT OF EUROPE, THE DANUBE SPLITS INTO A BIRD-FILLED LABYRINTH OF LAGOONS, LAKES AND SWAMPS, WHERE LIFE MOVES TO NATURE'S TIME



Eyes watering from the onrushing air, I'm starting to regret my decision to sit in the bow. As a setting sun transforms our waterway into a fiery ribbon, nature guide Razvan Crimschi guns the skiff's powerful outboard motor, causing the agile craft to bounce ever higher across the channel's corrugated surface. Speed is now of the essence: being out after dark in Romania's Danube Delta is frowned upon by local police.

Sfantu Gheorghe, the very last village on this branch of the mighty Danube, is proving gratifyingly hard to reach. Following a four-hour car ride from Bucharest to the small town of Mahmudia, I'm on the final leg of a journey that's taken me to the very edge of Europe.

A procession of black terns keeps pace effortlessly with the skiff, as we pass towering reed beds, silhouetted against the rosy-hued sky. Beached beside the river are the hulks of several fishing boats. Then all signs of human life are gone.

"You better hope you don't need to come back in a hurry," shouts Crismschi over the wind, as we plough on into the gloaming. "The road finished in Mahmudia."

Rising deep within Germany's Black Forest, the Danube, Europe's second-longest river, meanders southeast through 10 countries and four capitals. In eastern Romania, before emptying into the Black Sea, it splits into a bewildering plexus of lagoons, swamps, lakes, floating islands, subtropical forests and endless corridors of reeds.

A UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, this delta region is a natural paradise teeming with life. As one of Europe's most extensive wetlands, it's home to more than 5,000 animal and plant species. White-tailed eagles hunt for prey among the reed beds, vast squadrons of cormorants roost in noisy colonies, ungainly pelicans acquire graceful synchrony as they soar on thermals overhead. Somewhere in the waters below, the Danube's few remaining sturgeon live out their long lives in murky mystery.

"This is one of the last places in Europe where nature is still virgin," says Razvan, a 42-year-old Romanian who's lived in the delta since birth. "Outsiders soon discover that everything moves to nature's time here."

Having pushed nature's time to the limit, my guide and I motor into Sfantu Gheorghe as the last vestiges of daylight disappear from a starry sky. Dumping my suitcase, we dine on carp and buttered potatoes in Cherhanaua Veche, a waterfront restaurant filled with merry locals and the sounds of Europop. Retiring to my room, I'm lulled to sleep by a cacophony of barking dogs, a chorus of tree frogs and the falsetto cries of a golden jackal.



The following morning I wake early and wander along Sfantu Gheorghe's modest waterfront. A flotilla of fishing boats and tourist craft, many with cormorants sunning themselves on the gunwales, bob gently at their moorings. On the harbourside, a trio of fishermen repair a giant net with wooden needles and calloused hands.

In the warm sunlight, Sfantu Gheorghe is a picture of rustic charm. Single-storey wooden cottages with thatched roofs and ornate facades line the streets, while picket fences border gardens filled with sunflowers and fruit-laden fig trees. In the grassy spaces between the cottages cows graze nonchalantly. Golden bundles of reeds lean against walls, ready for summertime roof repairs.

Situated right at the river mouth, Sfantu Gheorghe is the end of the line for the 1,700-mile Danube. With only







CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Razvan Crimschi setting a camera trap; great white pelicans taking off from the Danube; fisherman mending his nets













15,000 or so human residents, the Danube Delta is fairly sparsely inhabited. The people who live here trace their origins to many different cultures and ethnicities, but all share one common trait — a strong bond with nature and water. Sfantu Gheorghe's 1,000-strong population is mostly engaged in fishing and agriculture, as well as the area's nascent tourism industry.

After breakfast, Razvan and I take a walk through the village towards the edge of land and sea. By one tumbledown cottage we stop to speak with Elena Cernamorit, a stereotypical babushka in headscarf and heavy skirt, her eyes etched with crow's feet.

"All my children have left Sfantu Gheorghe for Tulcea or Bucharest," she says. "They love the life here, but they need to work. My husband has died, so it's harder to keep things in good order."

Leaving the village, a dusty path takes us into marshes carpeted with yellow water iris. Knee-deep in water and half concealed by reeds, a handful of cows and horses graze under a cloudless sky. Purple herons and great white egrets stalk the shallows, while marsh harriers glide low over the water, dark graceful shapes on powerful uplifted wings. A baby turtle makes a spirited crawl to safety, inches from our feet.

PURPLE HERONS AND GREAT WHITE EGRETS STALK THE SHALLOWS, WHILE MARSH HARRIERS GLIDE LOW OVER THE WATER, DARK GRACEFUL SHAPES ON POWERFUL UPLIFTED WINGS

Several abandoned military bunkers squat amid this natural idyll, their incongruous, angular lines the legacy of another era. "I guess somebody thought the delta needed defending," says Razvan, shrugging. "We thought about turning them into birdwatching hides, but the concrete is too thick."

The beach at Sfantu Gheorghe is one of Romania's wildest and finest; a great, windblown arc encrusted with countless shells. Deposited along the shoreline are bizarre, anvil-shaped tree trunks, embedded in the tidal mud, while a rusting metal skeleton may be a missile launcher — or some kind of agricultural device. Fine, white sand is banked and heaped into a series of miniature dunes, ever-shifting aeolian sculptures moulded by the constant breeze.

In summer, this beach is crowded with Romanian holidaymakers — today, in May, it's deserted; it feels like the end of the world. The metronomic, surf-flecked rollers of the Black Sea wash ashore with steadily encroaching regularity. At the mouth of the Danube, the fresh waters of the river clash exuberantly with the saline waters of the sea, pushing onward until they lose their energy and are swallowed up forever.

We wander back slowly through shimmering salt flats, incandescent in the mid-afternoon sun. Clouds of waders jink and wheel just above the ground, alighting for a few seconds before taking off again into the superheated air.

"When the summer season starts you can take the *trocarici* to and from the beach," says Crimschi, simultaneously pointing out an exotic-looking bird, a hoopoe, sitting on a nearby branch. "It's a trailer pulled by an old car. We call this Sfantu Gheorghe's public transport system. Without the timetable, of course."

Even for non-ornithologists, the Danube Delta is an avian wonderland. Early the next day, Razvan and I take a boat ride to the Melea lagoon, formed by an ever-growing spit of land called Sacalin Island. Protected from the waves of the Black Sea by this sedimentary barrier, the shallow lagoon is home to an astonishing array of birds.

The pelican is the icon of the Danube Delta, and you can find two species here: the endangered and more gregarious great white pelican, and the less gregarious, even rarer Dalmatian pelican.

This morning, as we emerge onto the lagoon from a narrow channel, a huge raft of great white pelicans immediately swings into view, clucking, paddling, preening and flapping their expansive wings among clusters of white and yellow water lilies. Another smaller group, working together, has encircled and trapped a shoal of fish in the shallow water and are busy scooping up their haul in pouched, mustard-coloured bills. Razvan switches off the engine and we drift slowly forwards, marvelling at this spectacular melee.

"Many fishermen don't like pelicans because they're supposed to steal fish, but these birds are what all the tourists come to see," he says. "Thanks to conservation measures the populations of both pelican species are now on the increase."

HOME LIFE

Returning to Sfantu Gheorghe, it's time to relocate to the home of Natalia Palade, who also happens to be Razvan's aunt. Alternately wheeling and carrying my suitcase through the sandy backstreets of Sfantu Gheorghe, I arrive at a picture-postcard cottage on the outskirts of the village, with whitewashed walls, sky blue windows and an immaculate roof of thatched reed. A budding vine snakes its way through a metal pergola, while a well-tended garden gives off the heady scent of fruit blossom.

Waiting on the front porch to welcome me, in an orange apron and with flour-dusted hands, Palade is the epitome of homeliness; her face, with its ready smile, framed by a mass of grey curls. Despite the lack of a common language, she's clearly unhappy with my current state of nutrition. A heaped plate of freshly baked apple cake is rapidly produced, followed by a metal samovar (decorated tea urn) and selection of tea bags. My spotless bedroom smells of furniture polish and freshly laundered sheets.

Born and raised in Sfantu Gheorghe, Natalia was involved in caviar production for more than 40 years. When sturgeon fishing was officially banned in the delta in 2006, she decided to take paying guests to make ends meet. The warm welcome and traditional menu on offer here keep many coming back, year after year.

Invited into the al fresco kitchen at the back of the house, I watch her prepare *storceac* (sturgeon soup). Due to the ban on the central ingredient, Natalia's version is made with meaty pieces of catfish, together with potatoes, green pepper, lashings of sour cream and a sprinkling of dill.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Fishermen off the coast of Sfantu Gheorghe; cow resting in Sfantu Gheorghe; Natalia Palade's freshly baked apple cake; sheaves of reeds drying in the sun



"Sfantu Gheorghe is the only place in Romania where you should eat *storceac*," explains Razvan, who's arrived just in time to dine. "It's not the same with catfish, of course. But the way my aunt makes it, you can hardly tell the difference."

Despite the ongoing sturgeon ban, it's hard to escape Sfantu Gheorghe's long fishing tradition. Drying herring adorn the front gardens of houses across the village, neatly bisected and hung up on lines like pairs of socks. The wooden carcasses of decaying boats sit stranded on street corners, half-enveloped by beds of wild flowers. Even the metal-roofed church boasts a decorative anchor in its grassy compound.

The prosperity of Sfantu Gheorghe — or its comfort, at least — rested on the sturgeon's scaly back for many years. As we walk down to Sfantu Gheorghe's dock after lunch, Razvan tells me how the loss of sturgeon fishing has had a devastating impact on local livelihoods.

Under Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu, who treated the delta as a wild resource that needed to be tamed, Sfantu Gheorghe enjoyed relative fame and fortune. A fish processing plant was opened here in the 1950s providing jobs for all, and the area began to boom. Fishermen flocked to the village from far and wide.

"Sfantu Gheorghe's plant processed pike and herring, but the most valuable fish was always the caviar-rich sturgeon," explains Razvan. "Most of the fish and caviar were exported for hard currency."

UNDER ROMANIAN DICTATOR NICOLAE CEAUȘESCU, WHO TREATED THE DELTA AS A WILD RESOURCE THAT NEEDED TO BE TAMED, SFANTU GHEORGHE ENJOYED RELATIVE FAME AND FORTUNE

The good times, unfortunately, didn't last. Soon after Ceaușescu was overthrown in 1989, Sfantu Gheorghe's fish processing plant closed its doors. Decimated by years of overfishing, sturgeon stocks in the area collapsed. Since then, the village's remaining fishermen have just about scraped by, catching (more or less) what they're allowed, and selling it at rock-bottom prices.

Arriving at the waterfront, Razvan catches sight of his friend, Claudiu Sabloschi, a working fisherman. Clad in a fishing smock and waterproof trousers, the 26-year-old is picking herring from a net and tossing them onto a pile in the bottom of his boat. "Every fisherman here has seen his catch go down," says Claudiu. "My father lost his job at the processing plant like everyone else and eventually retired from fishing during the worst times in the 1990s."

Yet, despite the fact that most of Sfantu Gheorghe's young people have left to look for work, Claudiu has decided to stay. "This is my home," he says. "There's no place like it. If I can't make it as a fisherman, I'll try tourism. But I'll raise my family here."

ON THE UP

Despite its relatively extreme location, Sfantu Gheorghe isn't actually the easternmost point in Romania. That honour goes to the town of Sulina, 18 miles to the north, on another branch of the Danube.

The next day, Razvan and I take a high-speed boat ride to Sulina. Once a wealthy place, today the town has a rakish air, with rusting, iron-lattice balconies and dilapidated waterfront mansions. The entire length of the Danube is measured from the town's Ottoman lighthouse, a white cylindrical building with button-like portholes.

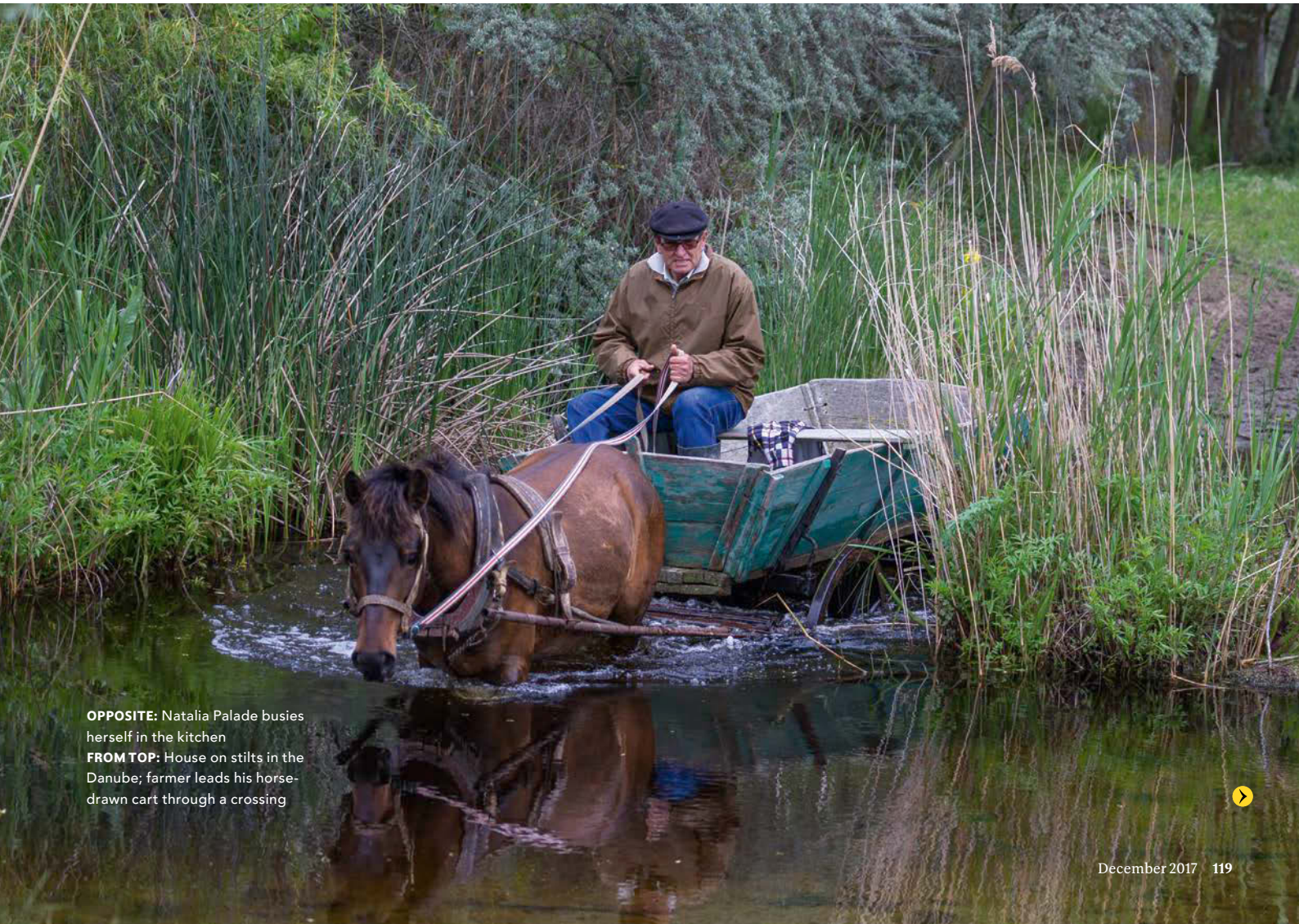
On the way back to Sfantu Gheorghe, we encounter Razvan's father, tending his herd of imposing looking tauros. These ancient cattle have recently been introduced to the delta by Rewilding Europe, a progressive, pan-European conservation initiative working to make Europe a wilder place by restoring natural processes such as flooding and natural grazing.

"The idea of the tauros is that they're natural grazers," explains Razvan. "They live as wild animals and create a mosaic landscape in the dryer parts of the delta. This benefits countless other species, such as birds and small mammals, and their predators, like the golden jackal."

Rewilding Europe is also looking to support small businesses in Sfantu Gheorghe, helping them to generate incomes from rewilding-related activities, such as wildlife watching. Jenica Pension, a local guesthouse, has already received a loan to improve its facilities and buy wildlife-watching equipment.

"People here desperately need an alternative to fishing and agriculture," says Razvan. "But it's hard to raise the capital and acquire the expertise to start a business. By helping locals earn a fair income from nature, an initiative like Rewilding Europe incentivises people to conserve the delta's natural resources, not exploit them."





OPPOSITE: Natalia Palade busies herself in the kitchen
FROM TOP: House on stilts in the Danube; farmer leads his horse-drawn cart through a crossing





Today, the tourist infrastructure in Sfantu Gheorghe is starting to improve. The four-star Green Village Resort offers visitors accommodation in tasteful thatched cottages, reminiscent of African safari lodges, many of which overlook the Danube. The resort, which is entirely constructed from local materials, also has a good range of facilities, such as a spa and pool, and there are kayaks and bikes available for guests to rent.

"IT'S A DELICATE BALANCE," SAYS RAZVAN. "WE WANT TO KEEP THE TRADITIONS ALIVE THAT MAKE THIS PLACE SO SPECIAL. BUT PEOPLE CAN'T LIVE IN A TIME WARP."

"It's a delicate balance," says Razvan. "We really want to keep the traditions alive that make this place so special. But local people can't live in a time warp. They have the right to a more comfortable, secure life. Small-scale nature-based tourism can really help reinvigorate this area and its people."

A mid-afternoon flight back to London from Bucharest necessitates an early departure on my final day. Ready for church in her Sunday best, Natalia stands at the gate of her beautiful home and waves goodbye. My suitcase, its wheels clogged with the sand of Sfantu Gheorghe's streets, is soon stowed safely aboard Razvan's boat, and we set off under a mercifully clear sky.

Rounding a bend in the river, the buildings gradually disappear from view for the last time, one by one. Though I'm sad to be leaving, at the same time it's reassuring to know this plucky, welcoming village will always be here for future visits, an outpost of human endeavour at Europe's wondrously wild and watery end.

ABOVE: Tauros cattle grazing

ESSENTIALS

Getting there & around

There are daily direct flights from London to Bucharest, with Ryanair, Wizz Air and British Airways. There are also direct flights from Bristol with Ryanair, Glasgow with Wizz Air and Liverpool with Blue Air. *ryanair.com wizzair.com ba.com*

AVERAGE FLIGHT TIME: 3h.

The cheapest way to get to Tulcea from Bucharest is by bus, which takes 4-5 hours. *augustina.autogari.ro* By car it takes 3.5 hours and rentals can be dropped off in Tulcea; book taxis online. *taxibucharest.com* Regularly scheduled ferries — both traditional 'slow' ferries and faster (more expensive) hydrofoils — leave from Tulcea on select days, to both Sfantu Gheorghe and Sulina. Ferry schedules can be viewed at *romaniatourism.com/tulcea.html*

When to go

Spring and autumn are dry and pleasant with cool nights and warm days, while the summer months (June-August) can get very hot. Best for birdwatching are the first three weeks of May and late August to mid-September.

Places mentioned

Green Village Resort. *greenvillage.ro*
Cherhanaua Veche. *cherhanauaveche.ro*
Jenica Pension. *facebook.com/dimache.jenica*

How to do it

IBIS TOURS offers six-day tours of the Danube Delta, including road and river transfers to and from Bucharest, excursions and full-board accommodation in Tulcea and Sfantu Gheorghe, from £1,160 per person, based on two. Flights not included. *ibis-tours.ro*

DISCOVER DANUBE DELTA also offers various delta trips, including kayaking and birdwatching. *discoverdanubedelta.com*

ILLUSTRATION: JOHN PLUMER



Head to the CLOUDS

There might be only three steps to Heaven but there are plenty more ways to see the vertiginous monasteries of Meteora

A rock formation comprising around 150 gargantuan sandstone peaks, Meteora, in northern Greece, literally means 'suspended in air' — and it's easy to see why. The lofty columns dotting the landscape (the tallest: 2,100ft) look like they've been placed there by a divine being; the six active monasteries that still teeter at their top, even more so. In fact, monks began building them in the 14th century, a testament to the power of faith. A UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1988, no one who visits Meteora can help but be humbled by its ethereal presence. Here are four ways to take it in:

1 Biking

The steep inclines make mountain biking a heart-pumping experience, but for a gentler ride there's always the option to head out into the flatlands. One trail leads to the monastery of Ypapanti, nestled in a rock crevice near the town of Kalampaka. The area is a photographer's paradise so be sure to pause for snaps.



2 HIKING

Hiking is one of the best ways to discover this unique geological phenomenon, and you'll be following in the footsteps of the monks who first walked these paths. Ypapanti Monastery appears to cling to the side of the cliff face, while a sunset tour takes visitors right to the peaks, just as the sky turns a deep, wonderful red.



IMAGES: GETTY, VISIT METEORA

3 Climbing

These dramatic rock formations are covered by around 700 climbing routes, catering to everyone from hikers to mountaineers. Tour companies can provide everything climbers need — ropes, harness, guides — to get to the top, bar energy and willpower. But the epic views will make the effort worthwhile.

4 Scrambling

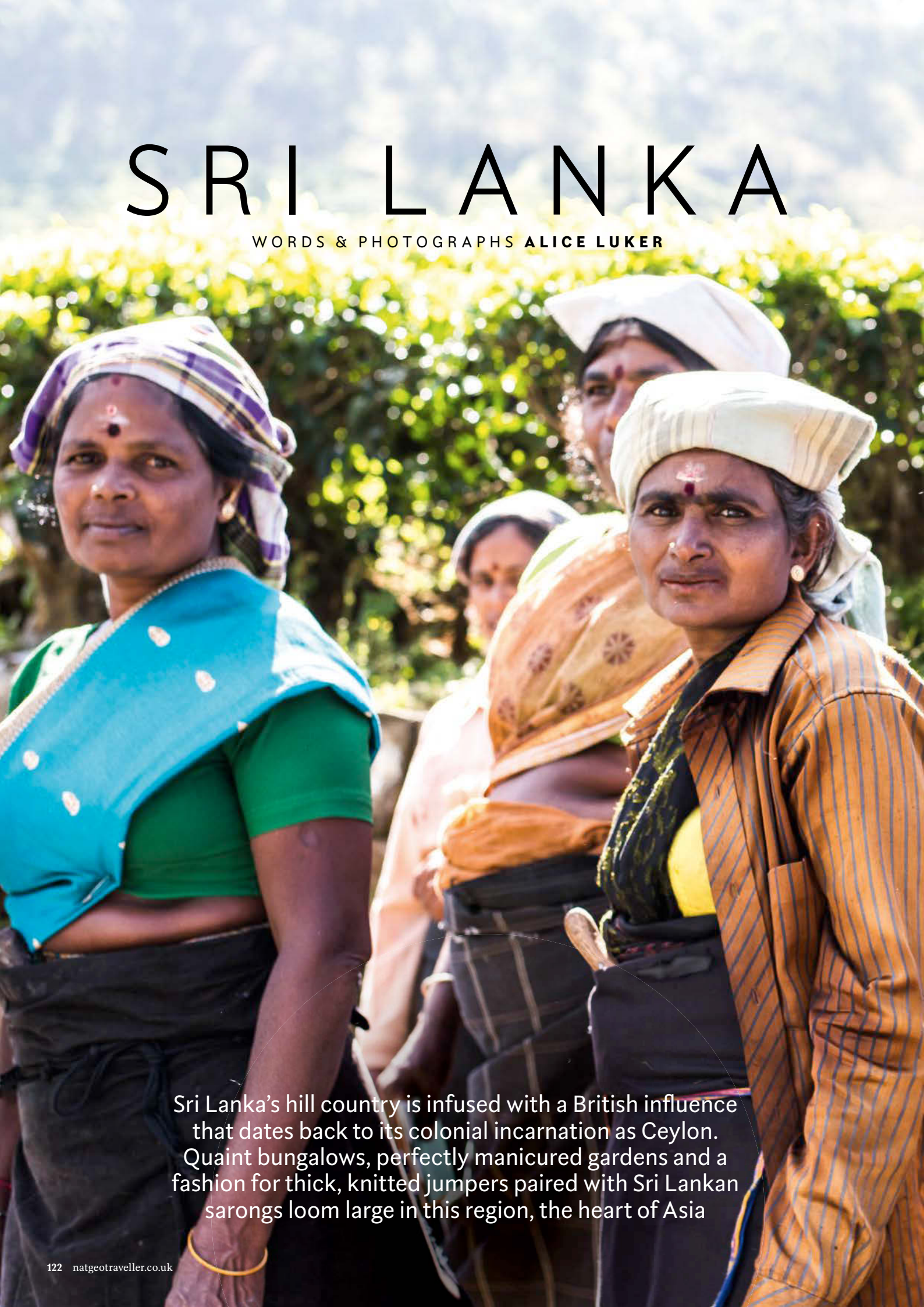
The Meteora adventure tour takes visitors up the area's tallest rock, the Great Saint, towering 1312ft above the town of Kalampaka. It's an adrenalin-fuelled experience, offering the ultimate views of the lofty monasteries that pepper the landscape, along with green swathes of countryside stretching into the distance.

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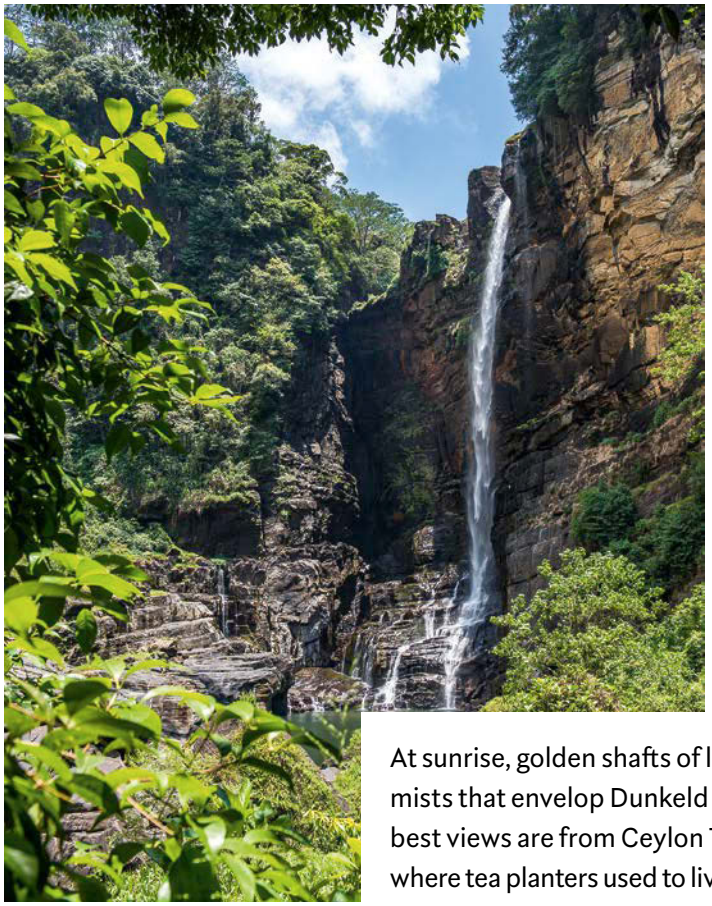
SRI LANKA

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHS **ALICE LUKER**



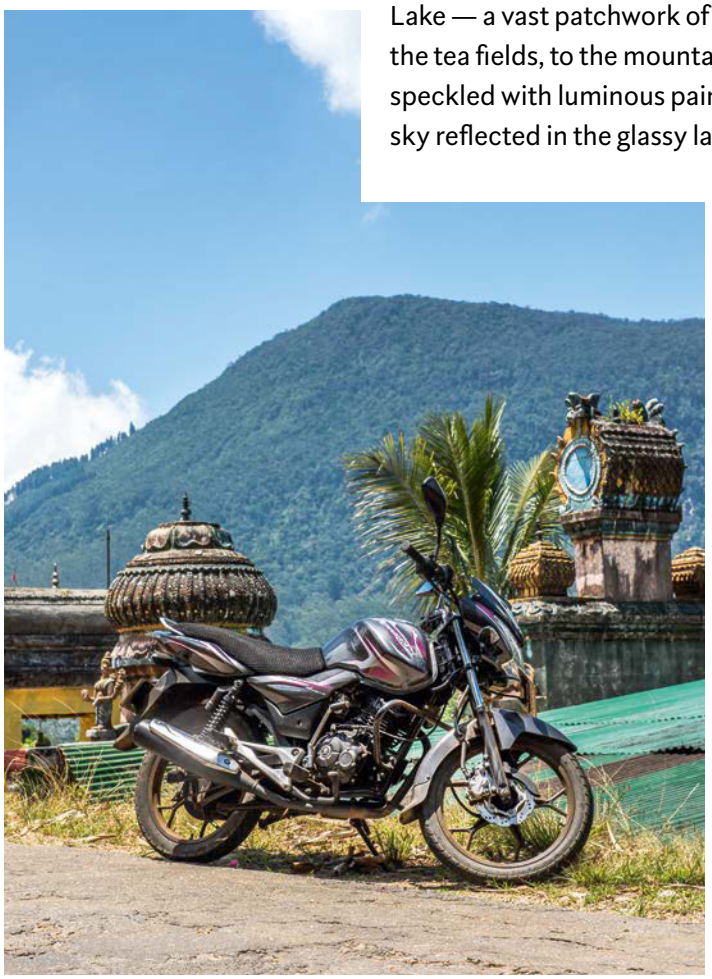
Sri Lanka's hill country is infused with a British influence that dates back to its colonial incarnation as Ceylon. Quaint bungalows, perfectly manicured gardens and a fashion for thick, knitted jumpers paired with Sri Lankan sarongs loom large in this region, the heart of Asia







At sunrise, golden shafts of light illuminate the swirling mists that envelop Dunkeld Estate tea plantation. The best views are from Ceylon Tea Trails' bungalows, where tea planters used to live, overlooking Castlereagh Lake — a vast patchwork of colours, from the green of the tea fields, to the mountainside Hindu temples speckled with luminous paint, and the crystal-blue sky reflected in the glassy lake.









As the sun rises, a chatter of spirited voices hums across the tea estates; the magnetic energy and sharp wit of the planters animate the trails. The day's gossip is delivered without pause, as the women form an orderly queue, their overflowing baskets ready to be weighed and recorded.







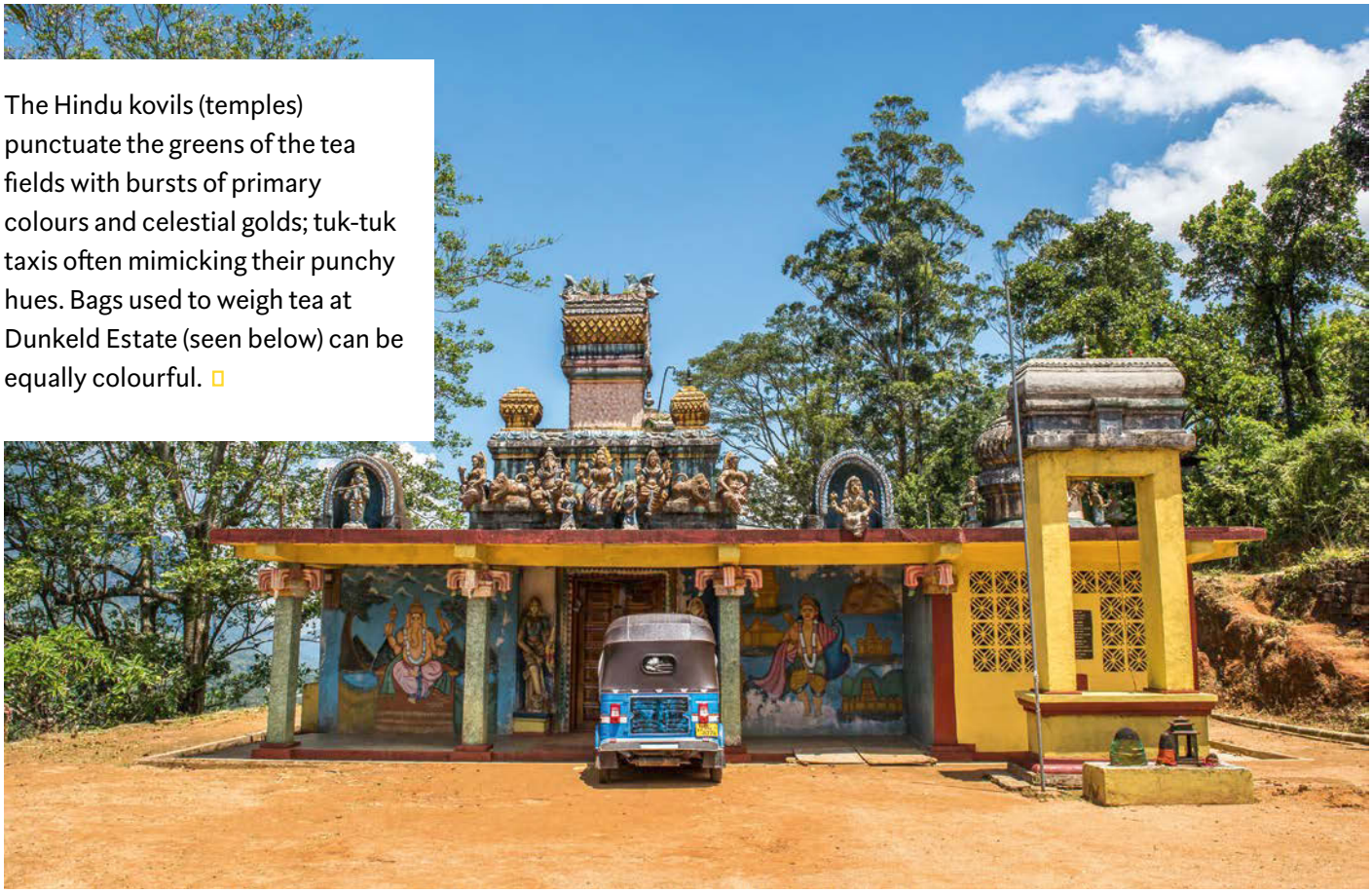






A sea of smiles emerges from the nursery as the workers are reunited with their children, having finished the weigh-ins from their second and final load of the day. This skilfully plucked, glossy green yield contrasts sharply with the neon-coloured buildings that brighten up villages.

The Hindu kovils (temples) punctuate the greens of the tea fields with bursts of primary colours and celestial golds; tuk-tuk taxis often mimicking their punchy hues. Bags used to weigh tea at Dunkeld Estate (seen below) can be equally colourful.









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THE NORTH BECKONS







Dramatically splayed across the fjords and bays of western Iceland, Reykjavik is the perfect place for an extended stay after an Arctic expedition with Quark

Take an unforgettable adventure through the serene Arctic with Quark, then touch down in the bustling Icelandic capital (via Akureyri) and let the adventure continue in the world's uppermost reaches. From the vast, deserted canvas of ice and snow comes a stop in a vibrant European capital, where a captivating mix of local and cosmopolitan awaits. Reykjavik is truly unique — offering a small-town vibe while still going big on food, culture and entertainment.



FROM LEFT: Reykjavik from Tjörnin lake; Leifur Eriksson statue and Hallgrímskirkja church; Blue Lagoon; Gullfoss waterfall; skewered monkfish dish; puffin

MUST SEE

It may be small, but the city packs a punch on cultural experiences

HALLGRÍMSKIRKJA CHURCH

Marvel at the soaring, art deco silhouette of Hallgrímskirkja — the largest church in Iceland and an icon of the city

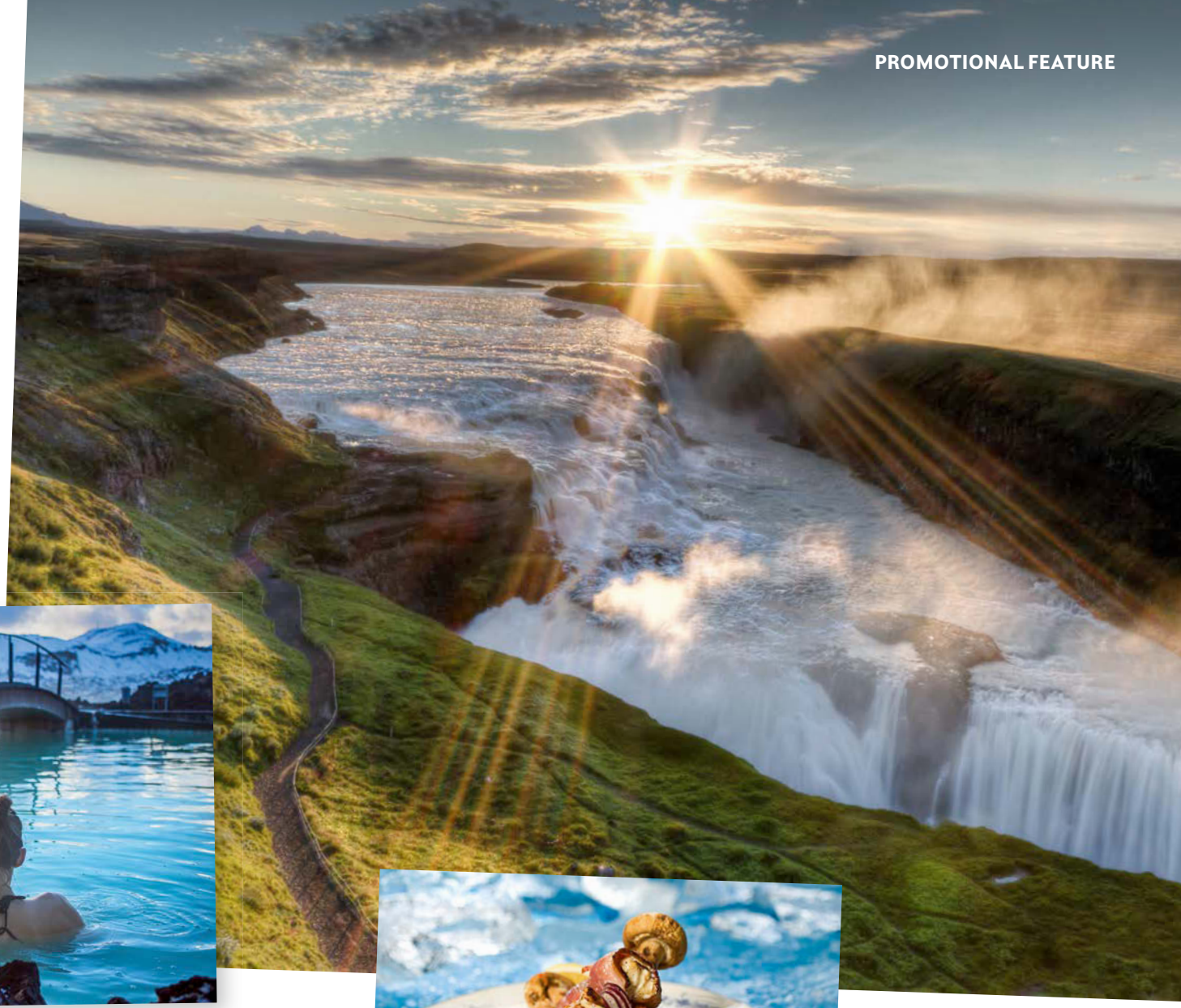
NATIONAL MUSEUM OF ICELAND

Delve into the island's fascinating heritage and history at the National Museum of Iceland, before strolling through nearby Hljómskálagarður Park

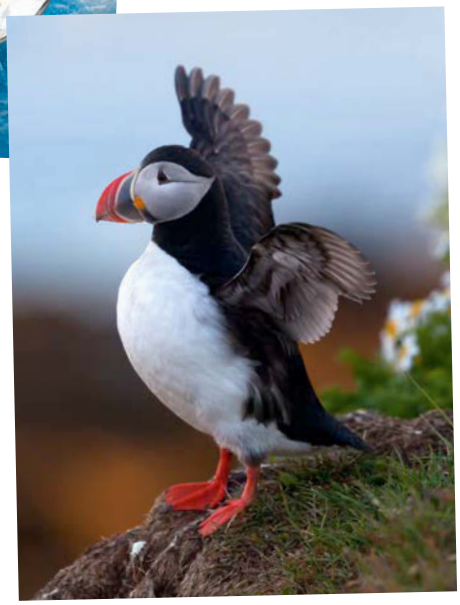
THE SETTLEMENT EXHIBITION

Step into the archeological remains of a 10th-century Viking longhouse that doubles as a museum









TUCK IN

Iceland's varied cuisine is enjoying a true renaissance, with local chefs reviving the national cuisine to delicious new heights. Its longstanding tradition of seafood can be sampled in dishes such as cured salmon or the traditional putrefied shark — *hákarl* — or the island's love of all things dairy, from thick, creamy skyr to local cheeses. Throw in tasty Nordic bakeries and Michelin-starred meals, too, and Reykjavik is rightly marked as one of Europe's prime foodie hotspots.

TAKE FIVE

Need to unwind? Head to one of the city's many thermal baths, where locals gather to kick back and catch up after a day's work. Thanks to its volcanic location, Reykjavik is blessed with a number of public pools where the warm waters ease aching muscles and offer a truly local experience.

EXPLORE

Getting up close to nature doesn't have to stop after leaving the Arctic. Perfectly placed for discovering the wonders of western Iceland, Reykjavik is the ideal base for local adventures. From the Golden Circle trail, taking in the majesty of Gullfoss waterfall, Geysir and Thingvellir National Park, to the Blue Lagoon, known the world over for its mineral-rich waters. Also nearby is the chance to glimpse the spectacular wildlife of the western coast, from graceful leviathans on a whale-watching boat tour to the birdlife, including Arctic terns and colourful puffins.

Start your epic Arctic adventure and explore Iceland's Reykjavik.

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IMAGES: GETTY; ALAMY

City life

CHICAGO

An extensive post-millennial facelift turned Chicago into one of the world's most dazzling cities. But in the original home of the Yuppie, change has become a way of life.

WORDS: *Nigel Richardson* **PHOTOGRAPHY:** *Lucy Hewett*





Looking trim, exuding cool, 81-year-old Buddy Guy dips his head to the microphone. "They don't play this kinda blues on the radio no more," he growls. The audience in his eponymous bar in downtown Chicago whoops in anticipation. This doyen of the blues guitar, mentor and hero of Keith Richards (whose guitar hangs behind the bar) and Robert Plant ('Inspiring me since I was a kid', says a note on the wall from the Led Zep frontman) launches into *Love Her With a Feeling*: "The woman I love, man, she kinda big and fat..."

Buddy is old school, and you could say the same for the city he has lived in for 60 years, since making the classic journey up the Blues Highway from Louisiana. When Buddy arrived, Chicago's unofficial poet laureate, Nelson Algren, had already written his bittersweet paean to the city, *Chicago: City on the Make*. Algren is a neglected literary figure these days but his muscular, ambivalent writings on Chicago merit a special exhibit in the city's new American Writers Museum and he is especially remembered for likening the city to a woman with a broken nose: "You may well find lovelier lovelies. But never a lovely so real."

Chicago is still lovely and real but, as I discover on this midsummer visit, the city has also undergone some pretty dazzling rhinoplasty in recent years. My first view of downtown, from the window of a taxi, has

an opening-credits feel — a pumped-up, rectilinear skyline the colour of tarnished coins, foregrounded by dark-bellied clouds over Lake Michigan. This is, remember, the City of the Skyscraper — the world's first steel-framed multistorey structure having been built here in 1885. Since then, through Prohibition and America's postwar building boom to Trump's portfolio of priapic Towers (yes Chicago has one), skyscrapers of litheness and beauty have continued to make perpendicular poetry above the city. The latest venture is the 94-storey Vista Tower, which will become Chicago's third-highest building (after Willis, formerly Sears, Tower and the Donald's hotel-and-condo complex) when completed in 2020.

Before my jet-lagged visit to Buddy Guy's blues bar (catching Buddy himself, incidentally, is a bonus as he plays unannounced) I walk the few blocks north from my downtown hotel to the Chicago River and stroll its south bank. With its score of liftable steel 'bascule' bridges and post-industrial neglect, the river corridor through the city was once that broken nose on a characterful face. But since the turn of the Millennium the city has invested in an ambitious programme to pedestrianise and landscape the section that wraps an arm around the city's central district (known as The Loop) with restaurants and bars, sculptures, wildlife-friendly zones, platforms for kayakers and a general air of easy living. This is the Riverwalk and as I crane my neck skyward, glancing ahead only to sidestep the joggers, I feel I have swigged, like Alice, from the bottle labelled 'Drink Me'. At one point I find myself pirouetting in amazement as the evening sun turns the art deco tower capping the 37-storey Carbide & Carbon Building into a bar of gold.

The next morning, with Buddy's blues licks still ringing in my ears, I take a guided architectural tour. Less than a decade after the city's first skyscraper broke the skyline Chicago's elevated rail system, known as the 'L', was opening its first lines on riveted steel trackways some 25ft above the new sidewalks. Nowadays the system's tentacles reach far into the suburbs but the original circuit of tracks enclosing The Loop remains, providing the template for two-hour introductions to the city's built environment run by the Chicago Architecture Foundation. My guide is 'docent' (volunteer) Howard Sachs, a retired engineer who says he's been riding the L "since my mom was holding me in her arms". Howard is miked up against the rackety-tack of the trains while our group of eight (mostly out-of-towners with a couple



PREVIOUS PAGE: Millennium Park Cloudgate by Anish Kapoor, popularly nicknamed 'The Bean'
RIGHT: Morgan Green line CTA stop


2932


Morgan
5061
905
WHO WALK
4





of Chicagoans) wear earpieces so as not to lose his commentary as we jump on and off trains and use various stations' platforms as viewing galleries.

We check off Willis Tower, the city's tallest; the Jewelers' Building, capped with tower and cupola that during the Prohibition era housed a speakeasy named the Stratosphere Lounge; and a triangular building with medieval-style arrowslit windows. "A federal jail. The top is the recreational area — some of the prisoners are waving to us," says Howard. Tiny figures do indeed peer down but there are no arm movements — they're probably drowning rather than waving. Then, at Clinton Station — beyond the Chicago River in the West Loop neighbourhood — Howard dips a toe in the socioeconomics of the city.

"When I was this young fella's age," he says, pointing to a teenager in our group, "I didn't come out here. This was Chicago's Skid Row. Now all these warehouses and crummy buildings have been converted into apartments." He gestures at the utilitarian brick blocks beyond the platforms, grit-blasted to pinkness and accessorised with balconies. It's that old yuppie story — appropriately enough for a city that, besides inventing the skyscraper (not to mention the ferris wheel, the chocolate brownie and the deep-pan pizza), defined the phenomenon of the young urban professional. The Y-word first appeared in *Chicago* magazine in 1980, in an essay that could have been written yesterday: "Real-estate prices have skyrocketed. Lofts and townhouses are being rehabilitated... to accommodate the rising tide of 'Yuppies'..."

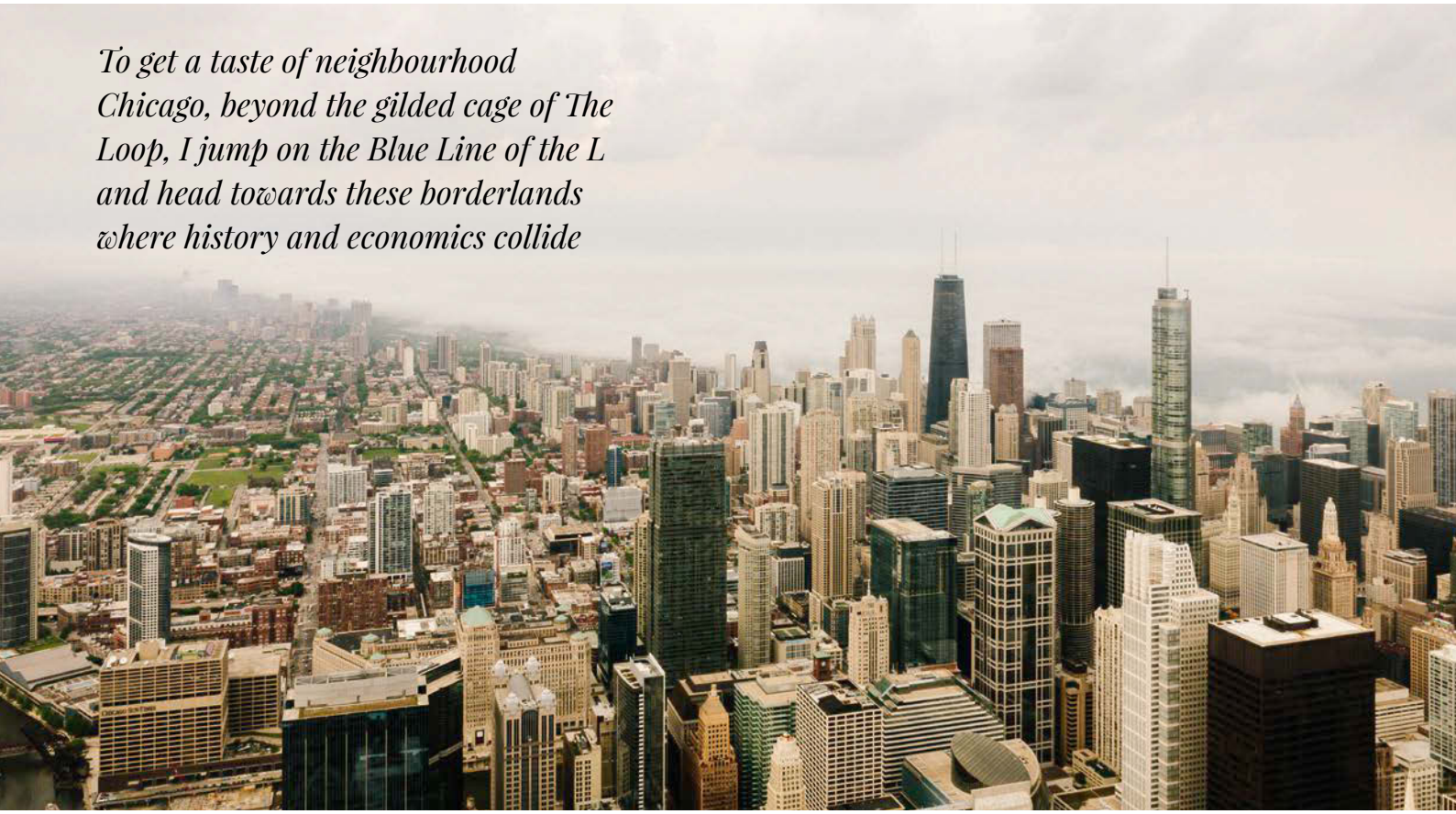
BEYOND THE LOOP

This roll of gentrification is the warp and weft of any dynamic city but it feels particularly marked in Chicago, where distinct neighbourhoods bump up against each other and guard their cultures jealously. Nelson Algren once claimed the Near North Side to be "almost as different as the Near Northwest Side, just over the bridge, in manners, mores, vocations and habits of speech, as Bronzeville is from Rogers Park". The same could be said today about the Wicker Park and Humboldt Park neighbourhoods lying to the northwest of downtown — once the stomping grounds of, respectively, Algren himself and Chicago's pre-eminent writer, Saul Bellow. To get a taste of neighbourhood Chicago, beyond the gilded cage of The Loop, I jump on the Blue Line of the L and head towards these borderlands where history and economics collide.

Alighting at Division station I catch the 70 bus due west on Division Street, through the heart of Wicker Park. In Algren's latter days here (he moved away in the mid-1970s)

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Street art in the predominantly Hispanic neighbourhood of Pilsen; Jose Gonzalez works at Esquina del Sabor, one of Humboldt Park's many Puerto Rican food trucks; the Chicago skyline from the Willis Tower; riverside bars and restaurants along Chicago Riverwalk; a food vendor in Pilsen

To get a taste of neighbourhood Chicago, beyond the gilded cage of The Loop, I jump on the Blue Line of the L and head towards these borderlands where history and economics collide







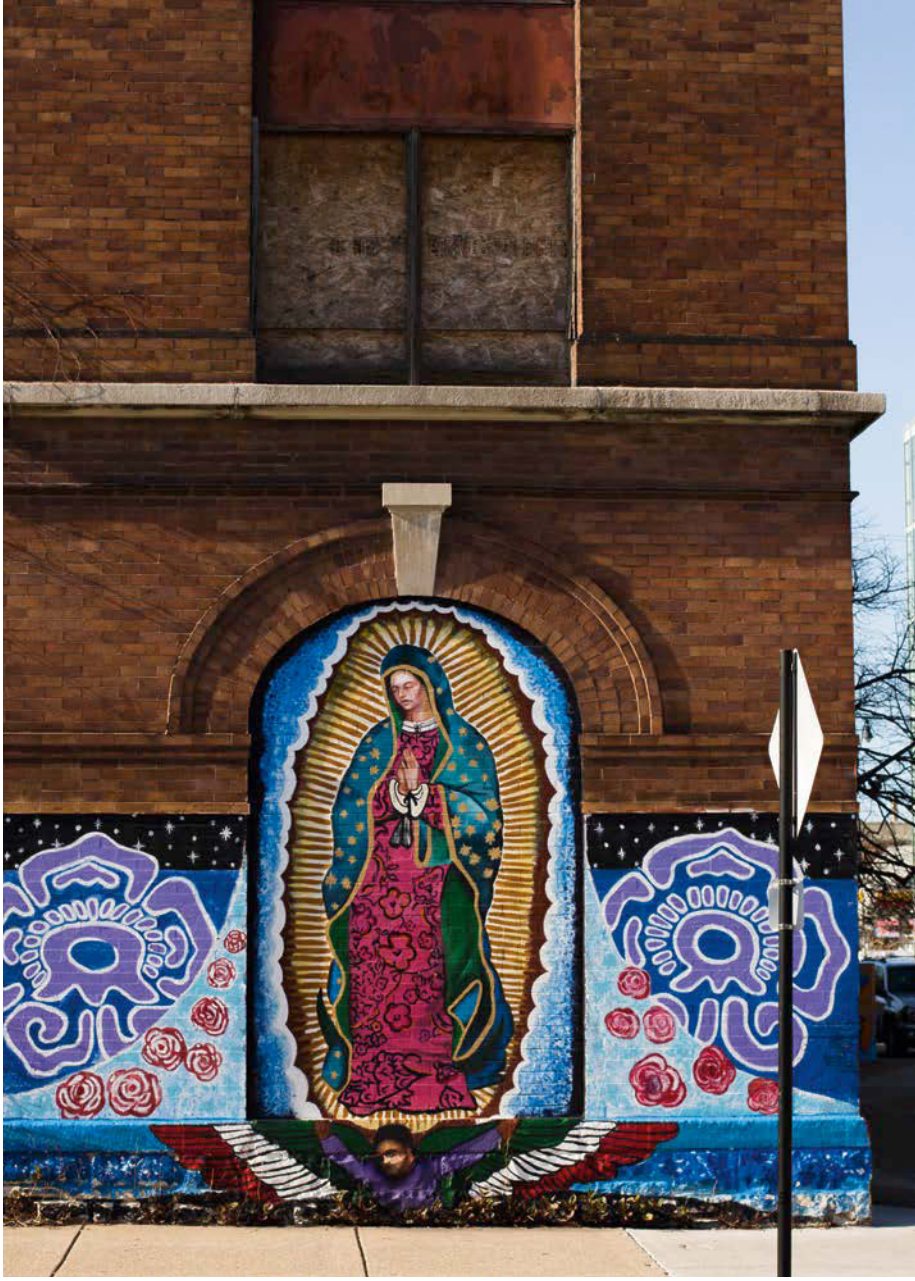
the neighbourhood was blighted by crime. Notwithstanding a homeless person pushing his world in a trolley it's now hipsterishly smart, with spacious mid-century apartment buildings and eclectic bars and restaurants such as Fifolet ('Cajun & Cocktails') and Joe's Wine Cellar ('Purveyor of fine wines, cheese, and craft beer'). But as the bus speeds west the picture changes. Beneath a steel-framed structure representing the Puerto Rican flag we enter the Paseo Boricua, a half-mile-long microcosm of Puerto Rico, the Caribbean island with a semi-detached relationship to the US (it holds 'Commonwealth' status). Here the amenities are culturally specific: a branch of Alcoholicos Anonimos, a grocer's that sells the staples of Puerto Rican cooking such as *malanga* and *calabaza*, and Lilly's Records, where you can buy men's guayabera shirts and seemingly infinite manifestations of the Puerto Rican flag.

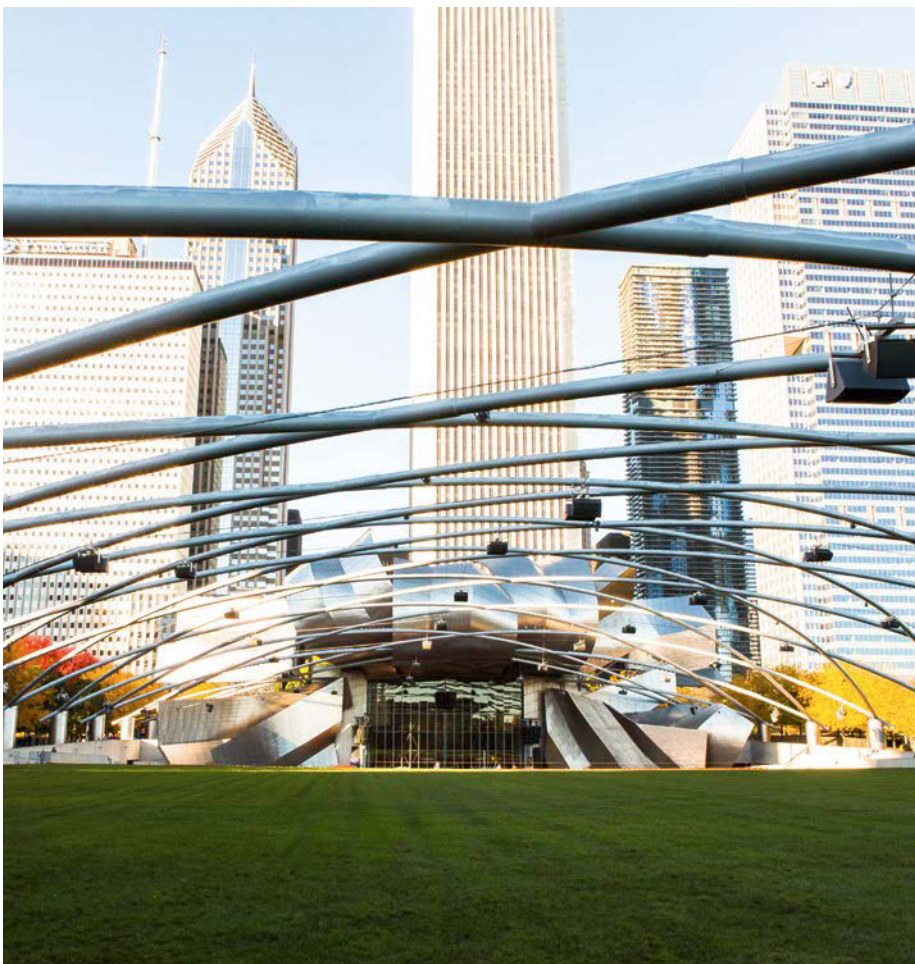
This is Humboldt Park, the neighbourhood that takes its name from an actual park that was in turn named after the 19th-century German naturalist Alexander von Humboldt. His statue stands in the park along with that of the Viking explorer Leif Erikson — a legacy of the area's origins as a home-from-home for German and Scandinavian immigrants. In the park there's a boating lake with boathouse, a beach with lifeguard tower, and half-timbered buildings that wouldn't look out of place in Bavaria.

This turns out to be Humboldt Park's former stables, which, in a process of seamless immigrant appropriation, now houses the National Museum of Puerto Rican Arts and Culture. Here I get chatting to Bianca Ortiz, the director of exhibitions, who shows me the current exhibition, a set of brightly coloured portraits completed in prison by the Puerto Rican activist Oscar Lopez Rivera. A hero to the Puerto Rican community, he spent 35 years in US jails for alleged terrorist links before having his sentence commuted by Barack Obama in 2017. "Rivera grew up in this neighbourhood," Bianca tells me. "It's thanks to him and his brother that the people here had access to Latino education."

That was a generation ago. Now, she says, the Puerto Rican identity in Humboldt

I find her sitting on a park bench with examples of her embroidered denim jackets draped over the bench while she works on a large hanging depicting a scene from The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air









Park is under renewed threat: "I was born and raised in the island. I moved here three years ago. People say it's safer now, but it's changing too. Puerto Ricans are having to move out because they can't afford it any more." She fears it going the same way as Wicker Park, where Latinos have already been chased out by gentrification. The museum, she says, stands 'like a rock' in the midst of this tide: "We are trying to preserve the culture here. It is free, open door to everyone."

That evening I see this dynamic from the other side when I return to the West Loop, the 'Skid Row' of Howard Sachs's youth, to eat in one of Chicago's innovative new restaurants. Eden, which has its own garden and greenhouse, offers 'a fresh take on Mediterranean and American food', having evolved from a catering business that reflects the neighbourhood's origins as Chicago's meatpacking district. "This is, or was, an industrial corridor," confirms chef Devon Quinn. But it's flourishing in new ways. The United Center, home of the Chicago Bulls (basketball) and the Blackhawks (hockey), is just two blocks away; the Chicago HQ of Google, which opened in a former cold storage warehouse in late 2015, lies a mile or so east. "It's a fast up-and-coming neighbourhood. It's been really interesting, watching the changing demographic," Devon continues as I eat a seafood stew as gutsy as Marseille itself, with a hoppy lager described (inevitably) as 'craft' on the drinks list.

So the neighbourhoods wax and wane, in some cases turning Chicagoans into visitors to their own, racially segregated city. In Millennium Park, The Loop's green and pleasant heart, 26-year-old artist Chanel Thomas finds refuge from Chicago's notorious South Side, where she admits life can be rough and dangerous. I find her sitting on a park bench with examples of her embroidered denim jackets draped over the bench while she works on a large hanging depicting a scene from *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, the TV sitcom with Will Smith. "I come down here because I know nobody's going to bother me," she says. "I just feel sorry that a lot of people on the South Side don't come down here much. My mom don't ever come, I guess because she wasn't ever able to from a child."

Swarming with tourists from scores of countries, Chanel's daytime haunt is one of the most relaxed, congenial urban spaces in the world. I spend a dreamy final afternoon watching the tourists watching themselves in the silver skin of Anish Kapoor's sculpture Cloud Gate (jelly-bean-shaped, hence its

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Street art in Pilsen; Jaume Plensa's Millennium Park statues; street cafe in Hyde Park; Pritzker Pavilion in Millenium Park





popular name of The Bean). I cool my bare feet (side-by-side with lunching office workers) in the stream that runs through Lurie Garden and then wander through the world-class Art Institute — home to Hopper's *Nighthawks*, Grant Wood's *American Gothic* and more works of French Impressionism than you can shake a palette knife at.

Then, as the shadows lengthen, I head for the outdoor, Frank Gehry-designed Pritzker Pavilion, buying a cold beer from a food truck on the way. In the summertime Chicago hosts a munificent programme of free cultural events that makes living in the city beautifully easy. This evening the resident Grant Park Orchestra and Chorus is performing a contemporary Missa Latina (Latin Mass) by the Puerto Rican composer Roberto Sierra. Surrounded by those coin-coloured canyons I settle into my seat and crack open the beer. And as *Hosanna In Excelsis* blasts through speakers hidden in Gehry's ingenious overhead latticework of steel pipes, the neighbourhoods sing back with a fanfare of sirens.

ABOVE: Seasonal blistered fresh beans and crispy chicken ballotine with ricotta gnocchi and aubergine at Eden; Eden interior

ESSENTIALS

Getting there & around

Aer Lingus flies up to twice daily to Chicago, connecting via Dublin airport where UK passengers can 'preclear' US immigration. British Airways, American Airlines and United fly direct from UK airports. *aerlingus.com ba.com aa.com united.com*

AVERAGE FLIGHT TIME: 8h45m.

Walking around The Loop is the best way to appreciate the architecture. The Chicago Transit Authority (CTA) runs L trains and buses. A Ventra Card (vending machines in all train stations) works on both: single train $2.25 (£1.70), 7-day pass $28 (£21). *transitchicago.com*

When to go

Freezing winters average around -7C, hot summers average around 27C. July and August are humid but there's a great programme of free events (see 'More info' below).

The annual Jazz Festival is over Labor Day weekend in September.

Where to stay

Kimpton Gray. *grayhotelchicago.com*

Places mentioned

Buddy Guy's Legends. *buddyguy.com*
American Writers Museum. *americanwritersmuseum.org*
The Chicago Architecture Foundation. *architecture.org*
National Museum of Puerto Rican Arts & Culture. *nmprac.org*
Eden restaurant. *edeninchicago.com*
Chicago Art Institute. *artic.edu*
Free concerts in Millennium Park. *grantparkmusicfestival.com*

More info

choosechicago.com
Lonely Planet Chicago. RRP: £13.99.
Nelson Algren's works such as *Chicago: City on the Make* (Univ. of Chicago Press).
Saul Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March* (Penguin).

How to do it

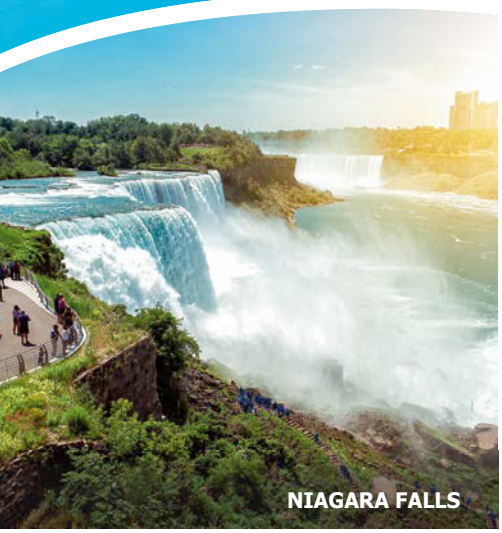
AMERICA AS YOU LIKE IT has a five-night 'Chicago and Springfield Route 66' fly-drive from £885 per person including flights, car hire and hotels. *americaasyoulikeit.com*



ILLUSTRATION: JOHN PLUMER

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IMAGE: GETTY

City life

PALERMO

The Romans, Arabs and Normans all left their mark on the picturesque Sicilian capital, where boisterous back streets and open-air markets collide to create a joyous sense of anarchy. **WORDS:** *Laura Holt*

"There are no restaurants on this street food tour," announces my guide Marco Romeo, as we stand at the mouth of one of Palermo's notorious markets. "And no clean toilets. The toilets smell — and not of roses. The food will be fried, greasy and fatty. And if you leave Palermo without trying a spleen sandwich, you haven't visited the city."

Pep talk over, we plunge in to the bowels of Capo, one of three labyrinthine markets — along with Ballarò and Vucciria — that dominate Palermo's heart. Akin to the souks of North Africa, these riotous, noisy mazes are the ideal place to acquaint yourself with the anarchic Sicilian capital. Aromas fill the air as we whip past stalls selling exotic spices and dried herbs.

Capo (meaning 'head' in Italian) has been operational since the ninth century and only closes for one day a year, 14 July, to mark the feast of Santa Rosalia, the city's patron saint. "When the Normans first arrived from France in 1061 to conquer the city, with their white skin and blonde hair, Palermo was like a North African city, filled with exotic people with dark skin, hair and eyes," Marco explains. "They named it Capo because it stands at the head of the city, looking down to the sea."

By then, the locals had learned to keep one eye on the water, as Sicily — strategically positioned between North Africa and Europe — had long been lapped by the waves of conquest. Phoenicians, Carthaginians, Romans, Byzantines and Saracens all tried to stamp their mark on the Mediterranean's largest island, but none more so than the Normans, who ruled Palermo as the capital of the Kingdom of Sicily from 1072 to 1194.

The city today unfurls like a palimpsest, revealing centuries of cultural shifts in its atmospheric streets and food: from the baskets of *babbaluci* (snails) we pass, distant relatives of the French escargot, to giant *arancina* balls, brought to Sicily by the Arabs in the ninth century. Stuffed with minced veal, peas and onions, they're a speciality at Antica Drogheria di Dainotti — a trio of neighbouring stalls run by the Dainotti family — which serves them up in their original form: without the tomato sauce filling.

Our feast continues with *cazzilli* (potato dumplings), *panelle* (chickpea fritters) and, yes, a reluctantly accepted spleen sandwich, before finishing with a delicious *broscia* (an ice cream sandwich in a brioche bun).

Like all things in this vibrant, chaotic city, the good and the bad seem to go hand in hand. Or, as Marco puts it, "One minute Palermo is the dirtiest, stinkiest city in the world; the next, it's the most beautiful and romantic."

After my morning in the markets, I'm beginning to see what he means.



SEE & DO

CATHEDRAL: Palermo Cathedral, a UNESCO World Heritage Site set in an exotic, palm-strewn square, is one of Italy's most striking yet least well-known cathedrals. Begun in the 12th century by Norman archbishop Walter Ophamil, its Islamic-inspired domes and mosaics pay tribute to the Arab craftsmen who helped create it. Relics of the Norman kings are on show and the views from the roof are incredible. Entry €7 (£6.25). *cattedrale.palermo.it*

NORMAN PALACE: Built in 1130 on the site of an Arab castle, the Palazzo dei Normanni ('Norman Palace') houses Sicily's parliament and the glitzy Cappella Palatina (Palatine Chapel), created by Norman monarch Roger II to impress visiting guests. Built using Arab artisans, the chapel features a spectacular wooden *muqarnas* ceiling, featuring ornate honeycomb-style carving; and Arabesque arches, although the mosaics were created by Greek craftsmen from Constantinople. Entry €8.50 (£7.60). *cappellapalatinapalermo.it*

CAPUCHIN CATACOMBS: From gilded heights to gory depths — head underground to Palermo's eerie catacombs. Home to 8,000 embalmed bodies, this macabre spectacle takes visitors along corridors paved with marble tombstones and lined with rows of mummified men, women and children, fully dressed and propped upright. The oldest dates back to 1599; the most recent, a two-year-old girl named Rosalia Lombardo, who died in 1920 and is eerily well-preserved. Entry €3 (£2.70). *palermocatacombs.com*

TEATRO MASSIMO: The Massimo Theatre is one of Sicily's most cherished opera houses. Behind-the-scenes tours, from €8 (£7.20), take in everything from the stage to the royal box and frescoed Coat of Arms Room. Performances from €16.50 (£14.80). *teatromassimo.it*

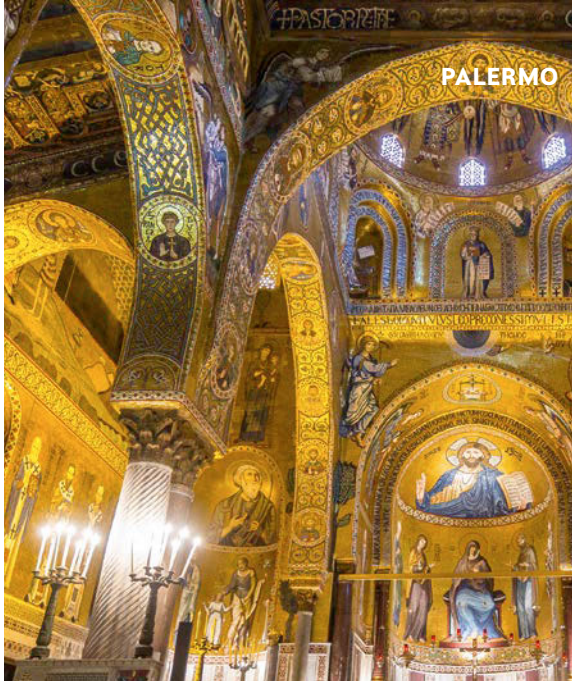
MARKETS: Nowhere is Palermo's chaotic spirit more palpable than in its trio of city-centre markets: Vucciria, Capo and Ballarò. The latter two are the most vibrant, with locals bellowing at each other and stacks of exotic produce piled high at every twist and turn of the tangled streets. Explore it with Marco Romeo, from Streaty, on a three-hour street-food tour. Rick Stein and Jamie Oliver have both been guests. From €30 (£27). *streaty.com*

STREET SCENES: To feel Palermo's pulse, head into its narrow, graffiti-strewn backstreets, where kids play football, families trade local gossip, and washing lines cut through the air. Take a snapshot with professional photographer Domenico Aronica, who leads three-hour photography tours, from €30 (£27). *palermowalkingtour.com*

DAY TRIPS: Popular excursions include the town of Monreale, on the slope of Monte Caputo, and the coastal enclave of Cefalú, both of which have a UNESCO-listed cathedral. The nearest beach is Mondello (just outside the city), although it gets crowded in summer. Instead, head to the town of Isola delle Femmine — which boasts a quieter, equally picturesque beach, with views of nearby 'Island of Women', from which the town takes its name.

IMAGES: GETTY; ALAMY









LIKE A LOCAL

PASSEGGIATA: The traditional evening pre-dinner stroll — particularly popular on Friday, Saturday and Sunday nights — sees everyone from octogenarian *nonnas* to well-dressed prima donnas turn out to see and be seen: simultaneously absorbed in their own activities while keeping an eye on passersby. Grab a seat at Antico Caffè Spinnato to watch the fascinating spectacle unfold. *spinnato.it*

APERITIVO: For another lesson in la dolce vita, partake in an evening *aperitivo*. It seems Aperol Spritz is the current cocktail of choice in Palermo, although La Galleria restaurant, behind the cathedral, has one of the city's best wine lists. Its street-side tables on Salita Artale stand beside Palermo's last *carretto* (horse-drawn cart) workshop, with its traditional hand-painted carriages stacked up in the street. *facebook.com/lagalleria2014*

ADDIOPIZZO: Look out for 'Addiopizzo' stickers in the windows of shops and restaurants that have joined together to help create a Mafia-free economy by refusing to pay *pizzo* (protection money).

Divide & conquer *//*

'Sicily has suffered 13 foreign dominations from which she has taken both the best and the worst', so wrote Italian writer Andrea Camilleri

EAT

I COMPARUCCI: This Borgo Vecchio joint is renowned for its pizzas and calzone. Despite the informal vibe, the regulars are invariably dressed like they've stepped out of a Dolce and Gabbana ad. Pizzas €6-10 (£5.40-9). *36e Via Messina, 90141. T: 00 39 091 609 0467.*

ALL'OLIVELLA WINE 'N' DINE: Set in a quiet city-centre square, this romantic restaurant faces the Church of Saint Ignatius. English-speaking waiters guide you through a menu that spans *fettuccine al pistacchio* to *spaghetti alle vongole*. Mains €12-14 (£10.80-12.60). *Piazza Olivella, 9, 90133. T: 00 39 0917852487.*

BISSO BISTROT: Originally a street-food venue in Vucciria Market, Bisso Bistrot has since moved to a site on the architecturally stunning Quattro Canti ('Four Corners') crossroads. The lively atmosphere remains the same and the pasta is still handmade. Don't miss specials like tuna and shrimp tartare. Dishes from €8 (£7.20). *172A Via Maqueda, 90134. T: 00 39 328 131 4595*

PREVIOUS PAGE: Capo Market and the Chiesa di San Ippolito Maggiore
CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Ballarò Market; Capella Palatina; tomatoes at Ballarò Market; traditional hand-painted *carretto* carts on Salita Artale



Mafia men *// The final scene of The Godfather Part III, featuring Al Pacino's 'silent scream', was filmed on Teatro Massimo's steps*

SLEEP

VINTAGE: A short stroll from the main attractions, this boutique B&B features industrial design and eye-catching artworks. Pendant lights and polished metal surfaces give it a hip yet homely feel. A communal library and lounge provide great spaces in which to relax. Doubles from €77 (£69). *vintagepalermo.it*

HOTEL PRINCIPE DI VILLAFRANCA: This smart four-star stands in a quiet residential enclave near the upmarket shops of Via Libertà. Contemporary art lines the walls and helpful staff are on hand to offer advice. Doubles from €120 (£108), B&B. *principedivillafranca.it*

VILLA IGIEA: A serene restaurant and pool look out to sea at this historic, old-world hotel. The original villa was restored in the late 19th century by art nouveau architect Ernesto Basile and many original frescoes and items of furniture remain. Doubles from €130, B&B. *villa-igiea.com*

FROM LEFT: Teatro Massimo; an atmospheric side street
FOLLOWING PAGE, FROM TOP: Street food, Vucciria Market; cipollate con pancetta (spring onions wrapped in pancetta) on the grill

IMAGES: GETTY; LAURA HOLT


1687

BUY

PLAZA MARINA: Traders at this weekend flea market near the sea set out simple stalls selling everything from bric-a-brac to antiques, books, bags, belts and vinyl. Restaurants line the fringes; try Pelle D'oca for the roasted chicken. *32 Piazza Marina, 90133. T: 00 39 091 588426.*

LA RINASCENTE: Overlooking the Piazza San Domenico and its lovely church, you'll find this smart shopping mall, with big-name Italian brands such as Max Mara and Missoni. Upstairs, rooftop bar Obicà offers fine views and post-retail refreshments. *rinascente.it obica.com*

GELATO: It wouldn't be Italy without ice cream and Sicilians take their gelato very seriously. Bar Gelateria Lucchese, on Piazza San Domenico, serves classics such as almond and pistachio, alongside the more curious-sounding zuppa Inglese ('English soup'), flavoured with Italian Alchermes liqueur to taste like English trifle. *11 Piazza San Domenico, 90133. T: 00 39 327 453 3838.*

AFTER HOURS

ANTICA DROGHERIA DI DAINOTTI: On weekend evenings, tables spill onto the street outside this string of three family-run stalls inside Capo Market. Street-food barbecue and cocktails are served until 2am. Enter by Via Porta Carini. *T: 00 39 340 870 3497.*

TAVERNA AZZURRA: This riotous bar in the belly of Vucciria Market is a Palermo institution. Well-oiled locals banter with barman Toto, who's been running the place for 40 years, and the speciality is *sangue* — a blood-red fortified wine that Sicilians drink as an aperitif (€1/90p a glass). Until midnight. *T: 00 39 091 304107*

PIAZZA GARRAFFELLO: Continue the party at this crumbling, graffiti-strewn square, which once formed the heart of Vucciria Market, but is now an open-air, late-night venue where DJs play until 3am at weekends.







ESSENTIALS

Getting there & around

Palermo is served by EasyJet from Gatwick, British Airways from Heathrow and Ryanair from Stansted. *easyjet.com ba.com ryanair.com*

AVERAGE FLIGHT TIME: 3h.

Compact Palermo is best tackled on foot, although motorised tuk-tuks offer the chance to navigate the narrow streets on three wheels. Tours from €70 (£63) for four people. Social Bike Palermo also offers bicycle hire and themed two-wheel tours of Palermo and Mondello. Hourly rental from €3 (£2.70). Tours from €40 (£36) per person. *apetourpalermo.it socialbikepalermo.com*

When to go

One of Europe's warmest cities, Palermo is mild year-round, apart from summer, which is hot and dry (averaging 27C in August). June and September are good times to visit; warm enough to enjoy the beaches but without the peak-season crowds.

More info

Sicilia Convention & Visitors Bureau. *siciliaconvention.com*

Wallpaper Guide Palermo.* RRP: £6.95. *phaidon.com*

Lonely Planet Sicily. RRP: £13.99. *lonelyplanet.com*

How to do it

PRESTIGE HOLIDAYS has three nights in Palermo, staying at Hotel Principe di Villafranca on a B&B basis, including EasyJet flights from Gatwick and private transfers, from £519 per person. *prestigeholidays.co.uk*

IMAGES: GETTY. ILLUSTRATION: JOHN PLUMER



The new face of ROME

What you know about the Eternal City is old news, so it's time to stop living in the past and get up to date

Rome is a city so steeped in history it can be hard to see beyond the past, but its ancient streets are a hotbed of innovation — even its 2,000-year-old monuments are getting a facelift. The Colosseum, Spanish Steps and Trevi Fountain now gleam in the sunlight, the soot scrubbed from their walls. Old has been made new, and even the ways to experience some ancient sites have been given a modern twist.

A new exhibit at the Ara Pacis Museum brings this altar's bloody history to life. In ancient times, the monolith was used for animal sacrifices, carried out by priests for peace and prosperity. While a narrator gives an historical rundown, visitors wear goggles to see it in virtual reality, as its wonderfully intricate paintwork is revealed. Meanwhile, a night-time tour of the Viaggio nei Fori begins in tunnels beneath the city and emerges in Caesar's Forum — where the show really begins. With the help of a bit of digital mastery, Caesar's world opens before visitors' eyes. They are thrown into a walking, talking Roman scene, witnessing how ordinary people lived, how the Roman emperors rose to power and how the empire was built, all the while sitting in amongst the buildings where it all began.

A marvellous example of a modern city at its best

But Rome is so much more than Roman history, it's a living, breathing city with a dynamic social and culinary scene. Five new restaurants were graced with a Michelin star this year: Assaje, for example, combines Mediterranean fare with a traditional touch, while at the other end of the spectrum, street food is going from strength to strength. Mercato Centrale is a brand new, ultra-cool venue in the Termini Railway Station compound, complete with pop-ups selling everything from focaccia to trapizzino. This incredible pizza-pitta hybrid comes with a huge array of fillings, from burrata to oxtail ragu. And from restaurants to shops, Fondaco, which opened its doors this summer, has got all the locals talking. It's a clothing, homeware and bookshop, as well as a spa, speakeasy and art gallery. It's official, while the Eternal City was birthplace of Western civilisation, it's also an example of a modern city at its best.

ROMA

turismoroma.it

IMAGES: GETTY

PROMOTIONAL FEATURE

Arabian sites

Discover a land of sand dunes, skyscrapers and souqs in Qatar

Here's a country where the modern world and history sit happily side by side. The world-class city of Doha has one of the most spectacular skylines in the world, yet these futuristic skyscrapers are accompanied by ancient forts, traditional souqs and seemingly endless sand dunes. Its burgeoning culinary scene makes it an ideal holiday destination — there are Michelin-starred chefs galore — and being one of the world's richest countries, the Qatari capital does a good line in luxury hotel options, too. Whether on a week-long visit, or just a weekend stopover, we've picked out five activities that shouldn't be missed.



Cultural Top Five



❶ Pearl-Qatar
Completely different, but no less fascinating, is Doha's Pearl-Qatar, a man-made island housing the beautiful, the rich and the famous. Covering over half a million square feet, its yacht lined marinas and brightly coloured buildings bring to mind a modern-day Venice, with high-end shops and restaurants, all sitting on picture-perfect promenades.

❷ Souq Waqif
One of the best souqs in the Gulf region, this market in Doha, destroyed by a fire in 2003, has been restored to look like the traditional souq it once was. And it's thriving; the best place in Qatar to witness traditional dress, find wonderful perfumes and see mounds of fragrant spices. It's also a great spot to see the art of falconry at work, as well as the Arabian horse stables.

❸ Museum of Islamic Art
A work of art in its own right, Doha's Museum of Islamic Art resembles a spectacular, white cubist palace, and is surrounded by landscaped gardens and a moat. It's positively a treasure trove, housing the largest collection of Islamic art in the world. There are two exhibitions on at the moment: Imperial Threads (running until 27 January) showcases works from the Turkish, Iranian and Indian dynasties, while Powder and Damask (ending on 12 May), presents ancient Islamic weapons and armour.



❹
AL ZUBARAH FORT
The walled coastal town of Al Zurabah, with its commanding military fort, is Qatar's largest UNESCO world heritage site, and lies an hour-and-a-half's drive north from Doha. It was once an important pearl fishing and trading port but was abandoned in the early 1900s, and its impressive fort now houses an archaeological museum. It's one of the best-preserved examples of a 19th-century Gulf merchant town, and the views from its walls are as humbling as the site itself, stretching out across vast sand dunes.

❺ Katara Cultural Village
Built to preserve ancient Qatari customs and traditions, this imposing complex in northern Doha houses galleries and theatres, with a lively year-round programme of concerts and exhibitions, workshops and conventions. Visitors can also just wander around; it's an impressive site, built in traditional Qatari style and offering a handicraft souq and book market, as well as an excellent array of restaurants and a mile-long beach. Coming in the evening for dinner and a show is an unforgettable experience.



QATAR

DOHA, QATAR Five nights at the five-star Shangri-La Hotel with Qatar Airways flights from London Heathrow, from £1,049 per person, for selected departures in May and June, 2018. **SAVE UP TO £568 PER COUPLE** For more information, visit *kuoni.co.uk/Qatar*. Tour Ref: QA0001

Discover more on Qatar at *visitqatar.qa*

TRAVEL GEEKS

ASK THE EXPERTS

NEED ADVICE FOR YOUR NEXT TRIP? ARE YOU AFTER RECOMMENDATIONS, TIPS AND GUIDANCE? THE TRAVEL GEEKS HAVE THE ANSWERS...



Q // The FCO is no longer advising against travel to the Tunisian coast. What can I expect from a trip there now?

The ban on all but essential travel to Tunisia, implemented following the shooting at Sousse in June 2015, was lifted in July. Now, travellers can benefit from affordable adventure that includes world-famous UNESCO-listed sites without the crowds.

Sites such as the Roman ruins of Carthage and El Djem mustn't be missed, but venturing further afield yields rewards aplenty. Slightly off the beaten track, Dougga is quoted as the best-preserved Roman town in North Africa and receives few visitors, as does the Berber village of Maktar, home to Roman baths and the impressive Arch of Trajan. While further south is the 1,300-year-old Great Mosque of Kairouan, one of Islam's oldest places of worship.

If you prefer more action, you can ride the century-old Lézard Rouge train — complete with original fixtures — deep into the Selja Gorges, wallow in the same hot springs Romans used at Korbous, and even escape to Ichkeul National Park, where the lake is a major stopover point for thousands of migrating birds, including pink flamingos.

Be aware that the western and southern fringes of Tunisia, on the border with Algeria and Libya, are still out of bounds (a state of emergency is still in effect following an attack on a police bus in 2015) and that the FCO continues to warn that 'terrorists are still very likely to try to carry out attacks in Tunisia'.

However, German and French visitors have already been returning because their governments didn't hold restrictions in place for as long as British authorities did. I'd follow their lead and explore one of the most exciting countries in the Maghreb. **EMMA THOMSON**

Tunisia has a wealth of history. Culture aficionados should stay in the capital, Tunis and get lost amid the medinas, madrasas, mosques, mausoleums, palaces and souks. Alternatively, for stunning sea views stay on the Carthage Coast at Gammarth, or the pretty Spanish-style hilltop village of Sidi Bou Said, with its cobbled streets, blue-and-white architecture and charming cafes. Wander among the ancient columns of Carthage, admire the world's largest collection of mosaics at the Bardo National Museum, and marvel at the Roman amphitheatre of El Djem — second only in size to Rome's. If you've got any time left, travel south and visit some of the desert locations, perhaps crossing the Chott El Jerid en route to Tozeur and the mountain oases of Chebika, Tamerza and Midès. **PETER KIRK**

IMAGES: GETTY

Q // What will travel insurance cover if I get caught in a riot or coup situation abroad?

If you are travelling to Catalonia, for example, and haven't already bought travel insurance, it's now too late. The riots there are now a 'known event' and insurance policies will only cover events that are unknown or unexpected at the time the policy is purchased.

For those concerned about civil unrest affecting a trip, look for a travel insurance policy that offers cover for *force majeure*, to include: civil war, rebellion, hostilities or natural disasters.



If your travel plans are disrupted and you can't return home as planned, *force majeure* cover would enable you to claim for additional travel and accommodation costs that you can't reclaim from anywhere, or anyone, else.

If the FCO advises against all or all but essential travel to the country you're intending to visit (or are visiting), because of *force majeure*, there are policies which will provide cover for cancellation of the trip, or if you've already travelled, to come home early. In either event, you'd be covered for costs you couldn't recoup.

Remember: *force majeure* cover won't apply if the event occurred or was notified before the policy was purchased. **FIONA MACRAE**

Q // I'm looking to celebrate New Year's Eve with a large group of friends in the Cotswolds. Where do you recommend?

Why not play lord or lady of the manor in a country pile on the edge of a quaint Cotswolds village? Set in a 13-acre of estate, surrounded by manicured gardens, Honeystone Manor has a cinema room, tennis courts and heated pool, and sleeps up to 20 guests across four separate houses. Plus there's a wow-factor party barn: guests can prop up the fully functioning bar, play pool or enjoy meals in the dining area — private catering is available on request.

And if you want to dine out — or add extra guests — this area of the Cotswolds is home to some of the UK's best restaurants with rooms. Think great food, inventive cocktails and plush-yet-affordable places to bed down (just book ahead). One week self-catering at Honeystone Manor over New Year (departing 29 December), costs £15,000, which is £750 each if there are 20 of you in the group. *thewowhousecompany.co.uk* **SARAH BARRELL**

Q // With the pound struggling, could you recommend a long-haul destination with low costs of living for travellers?



The stereotype of Japan being expensive is outdated: visitors these days are always pleasantly surprised at how affordable things are upon arrival — even in Tokyo (which the Post Office has just declared the cheapest long-haul destination for UK visitors).

Expect to pick up delicious bento lunches for around £3, buy a bowl of the tastiest ramen you've ever eaten for £4, or try a plate of conveyor belt sushi for 70p. The Post Office long-haul report points out how three course meals come in at as little as £35. Accommodation, even in the major cities, can be found for around £70 a night for a very nice hotel — or there are plenty of other options: capsule hotels for £15 a night, business hotels for £30, or, for that unique Japanese experience, you can even stay at manga cafes for around £10. Almost all the major sights, such as Meiji Shrine in Tokyo and Fushimi Inari Taisha in Kyoto, are free. For more information, visit *seejapan.co.uk* **HOLLIE MANTLE**

+ health corner

Q // My friend just returned from Brazil with horrifying stories about jiggers. What exactly is this and how risky is it?

Jiggers (*Tunga penetrans*) are parasitical sand fleas, the smallest known fleas in the world. They occur mainly in coastal areas in the Caribbean, Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa and India.

The female flea burrows into your skin, usually around the toenails, causing itching. Feeding on your blood and producing up to a thousand eggs she can swell to the size of a pea, appearing as a white halo around a black dot.

Jiggers are unpleasant but not generally a problem for travellers. However, in poorer communities an infestation can leave victims in pain, stigmatised and vulnerable to secondary infections.

TREATMENT: Removal of the flea with a sterilised instrument.

PREVENTION: Keep to concrete floors where you can and always wear sandals on the beach.

DR PAT GARROD

THE EXPERTS



EMMA THOMSON // TRAVEL WRITER



PETER KIRK // MANAGING DIRECTOR, TUNISIA FIRST *TUNISIAFIRST.CO.UK*



SARAH BARRELL // ASSOCIATE EDITOR, *NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC TRAVELLER* (UK)



FIONA MACRAE // *TRAVELINSURANCE EXPLAINED.CO.UK*



HOLLIE MANTLE // JAPAN NATIONAL TOURISM ORGANIZATION *SEEJAPAN.CO.UK*



DR PAT GARROD // *THEWORLDOVERLAND.COM*

THE INFO

STAMP OF APPROVAL

WITH A SURGE IN THE NUMBER OF BRITS APPLYING FOR IRISH CITIZENSHIP, AND BREXIT LOOMING, WHICH COUNTRY HAS THE MOST POWERFUL PAPERS? AND WILL PASSPORTS BECOME PASSÉ SOON ANYWAY?



PASSPORT POWER

The Global Passport Power Rank 2017 listed countries by the number of destinations their citizens could visit without a visa

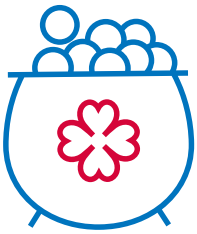
1 Germany & Singapore
158

2 Sweden & South Korea
157

3 UK (& other countries)
156

IN LAST PLACE ARE PAKISTAN, IRAQ, SYRIA AND AFGHANISTAN WITH LESS THAN 30 EACH.
PASSPORTINDEX.ORG





100,000

Irish passports issued in the UK during the first half of 2017, an increase of 50% on the previous year.

5 MILLION+

Passports printed every year in the UK at a secret location in the north of England.

25,000+

UK passports are stolen or lost every year.

SPAIN

More Britons lose their passports in Spain than any other country.

Goodbye passports

Starting in summer 2018, Dubai International Airport will install tunnels fitted with 80 facial recognition and iris-scanning cameras, doing away with the need for passports and interactions with border officials — just stroll through! Australia also plans to test a similar 'contactless' system that checks arrivals against electronic versions of passports and biometric cues from March 2019.



Royal treatment

The only person in the world who doesn't need to carry a passport when travelling abroad is Queen Elizabeth II

SECRET FEATURES







SHINE A UV LIGHT ON CANADA'S PAGES AND COLOURED FIREWORKS APPEAR, WHILE FOR NORWAY'S PASSPORT, THE NORTHERN LIGHTS FLARE ACROSS THE PAGE. IN 2012, FINLAND RELEASED A PASSPORT THAT ALSO SERVED AS A FLIP BOOK WITH A GALLOPING MOOSE.

HOT TOPIC

WE NEED TO TALK *Confederate icons*

THE UNITED STATES IS PULLING DOWN CONFEDERATE STATUES, BUT ARE THEY HISTORICALLY SIGNIFICANT MONUMENTS OR SIMPLY SYMBOLS OF ENDURING AMERICAN RACISM? WORDS: JAMES DRAVEN

There's not much at Manassas National Battlefield Park, Virginia. It's a beautiful spot but — aside from the visitor centre — the only clue that two battles for the future of this country were fought here stands 20ft high, casting a shadow across me, and perhaps the whole nation.

"Isn't it hugely offensive to honour one of the country's most famous racists?" I ask my guide, while other visitors nervously examine their shoes. Built in 1940, the polished bronze likeness of 'Stonewall' Jackson, a Confederate leader who won a key victory here during the American Civil War of 1861-1865, looks down on my insolence.

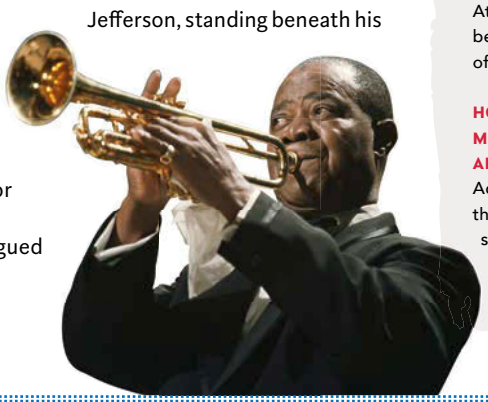
This is over two months before the notorious incidents of racial hatred in Charlottesville, Virginia, in which white supremacists will protest at the removal of a statue of Confederate icon, Robert E Lee, and kill counter-protestor, Heather Heyer.

"Don't you have statues of important figures from the Second World War in Britain?" replies my guide.

"Yes," I answer, "but we certainly don't honour Stalin in Trafalgar Square, nor is there a statue of Hitler in Berlin." It's recently been argued that Admiral Nelson should be toppled from his column because he had racist ideas back in the 1790s, but he never started — and lost — a war in defence of slavery.

Finally though, the US is facing up to its history. Across the nation, Confederate statues and monuments are being torn down, often under the cover of darkness and without warning to prevent violence. And in Washington DC, right on the Mall, no less, stands an impressive edifice: the National Museum of African American History and Culture, opened in September 2016.

With 10 storeys, five above and five below ground, America's black history begins, appropriately, in the dark of the basement, with the enslavement of Africans brought across the sea. It's the start of a journey in which the US publicly confronts some brutal truths about the founding of the nation, including pointing out that George Washington, the man on the one dollar bill, was a slave owner. A statue of President Thomas Jefferson, standing beneath his legendary declaration ('all men are created equal') is placed beside a pile of bricks, each representing an enslaved person who built his famous Virginia plantation house, toiled on his land, and, in the case of his young slave, Sally Hemings, gave birth to his children.



On the upper floors, there's some much-needed levity, and nods to the impact of black music on white America: Public Enemy's boombox, Louis Armstrong's trumpet and one of Chuck Berry's Cadillacs.

A must-see for tourists, this should also be a compulsory school trip for every class in the nation. How must black children feel when they're educated in one of the 109 schools named after Confederates who fought to keep African Americans enslaved?

These Confederate tributes aren't historical relics of the Civil War: they were built in the 20th century as impotent symbols of white supremacy. Nor is tearing down statues erasing history: do visit Manassas, but know it can tell its story without a monument to Stonewall Jackson, just as Charlottesville doesn't need an effigy of Robert E Lee to remind African Americans they live in a country built on slave labour.

Pull the statues down, pull them all down. They're a disgrace to the ideals of the land of the free — and I ain't whistlin' Dixie.

Q&A

WHAT ABOUT THE CONFEDERATE FLAG? THAT'S JUST A REBEL SIGN, RIGHT?
Growing up in Britain, it was to many of us just the design painted on the roof of Bo and Luke's 1969 Dodge Charger in *The Dukes of Hazard*. But, while neo-Confederates would like us to think of it as an emblem of Southern chivalry and righteous rebellion, it was in fact the battle flag of the Army of Northern Virginia which, under Robert E Lee, was fighting to preserve slavery. It's a banner under which to rally bigotry and hatred.

WASN'T THE CIVIL WAR JUST ABOUT STATES' RIGHTS?
A common argument. Yes, it was essentially about the southern states' rights… to maintain and spread slavery.

IS THE STONEWALL JACKSON STATUE STILL AT MANASSAS?
At the time of writing, it was being restored after an incident of vandalism. It wasn't me.

HOW MANY CONFEDERATE MONUMENTS ARE DOTTED AROUND THE STATES ANYWAY?
According to recent estimates there are over 1,500 Confederate symbols in US public spaces.

AND ANOTHER THING… THE COUNTRIES MAKING IT EASIER FOR YOU TO VISIT

CAMBODIA
Visitors can use a new e-visa option, before arrival, through the Cambodian Foreign Affairs & International Cooperation website, costing $30 (£23). *evisa.gov.kh*

INDIA
UK travellers to India on an e-visa can now stay for up to 60 days, up from 30, and enjoy double-entry benefits. It costs $60 (£39) from *indianvisaonline.gov.in/evisa*

ZAMBIA AND ZIMBABWE
The KAZA Univisa was re-launched this year. It allows visitors to Zambia and Zimbabwe to transverse the two countries. The price is $50 (£38) and it's valid for 30 days.

VIETNAM
Until 30 June 2018, UK tourists can enter visa-free for up to 15 days. The visa-waiver policy has been so successful it's been renewed every year since 2015. *vietnamtourism.com*

UGANDA
Uganda recently halved the fee of its e-visa to $50 (£38). Immigration officers decide how long you can stay, but it's usually three months. *visas.immigration.go.ug*

ETHIOPIA
British travellers to Ethiopia can take advantage of a new e-visa option introduced in June. It costs $52 (£39) for a 30-day, single entry e-visa. *evisa.gov.et*

IMAGES: GETTY

CHECKLIST: ECO-FRIENDLY KIT



PATAGONIA RETRO PILE HOODY
Fair Trade Certified
£120
patagonia.co.uk



SUNDRIED OLPERER MEN'S T-SHIRT
Made from 100% recycled coffee grounds.
RRP: £40
sundried.com



FINISTERRE SOLUS WATERPROOF PARKA
Waterproof, lightweight and PFC-free. RRP: £225
finisterre.com



PICTURE ORGANIC CLOTHING CALGARY 4.0 BACKPACK
50% recycled polyester with a reinforced, ventilated back.
RRP: £109.99 ***hypedsport.com***



7 ways to LEAVE NO TRACE

'ECO-FRIENDLY', 'SUSTAINABLE' AND 'RESPONSIBLE' ARE NO LONGER JUST BUZZWORDS — THEY'RE IDEAS THAT HAVE BEEN EMBRACED BY TRAVEL COMPANIES. TODAY, LEAVING (NEXT TO) NO TRACE IS EASIER THAN YOU THINK

1 // GO WILD

Going wild camping with minimal impact on the environment is harder than it sounds. Thankfully, US non-profit organisation Leave No Trace has tips on everything you need to know, from how to dispose of a campfire to which surfaces are best to camp on. *lnt.org*

2 // SUPER FLY

Keen to become a greener traveller? You could always stick out your thumb at the roadside and discover the joys of hitchhiking. A more practical option would be to download Glooby. The app finds and compares eco-friendly flights and hotels across the globe so you leave as small a carbon footprint as possible. *glooby.com*

3 // FESTIVAL FIX

Green Man, Glastonbury and Shambala have long waved the eco flag but a recent addition to the festival circuit, The Good Life Experience, is proving its worth too. Founded by singer and DJ Cerys Matthews, the three-day bash in Flintshire, Wales — is centred on food, books, crafts and the great outdoors, and boasts all things local, seasonal and verdant. Think bamboo rather than plastic plates and no plastic bottles in sight. *thegoodlifeexperience.co.uk*

4 // BOLDLY GOING

The vast majority of Intrepid Travel's tours and all its global offices have offset their carbon footprint. So whether you're cycling across Central America, on safari in Tanzania, or trekking across Patagonia, you can relax, safe in the knowledge your carbon will be cancelled out by contributions to projects in Kenya and Cambodia. *intrepidtravel.com*

5 // POSITIVELY NEGATIVE

Forget carbon neutral, Bhutan is now carbon negative (the country is 70% forest, which helps), and it plans to produce zero greenhouse gas emissions and waste by 2030. Plus, visitors have to stump up a hefty entry fee of up to $250 (£188) a day, $65 (£49) of which goes towards free education and healthcare, and poverty alleviation. *tourism.gov.bt*

6 // HAPPY CAMPERS

Be more nomadic on your next trip and seek out a tour operator that can create a camp just for you. Often these are bespoke luxury options meaning that you can remain eco-friendly without having to slum it. Sleep in Bedouin tents in Oman's Wahiba desert with Hud Hud Travels or join the Tanda Tula low-impact safari camp in the Greater Kruger National Park in South Africa. There'll be nothing there before you and nothing remaining after you leave. Just memories. *hudhudtravels.com tandatula.com*

7 // CITY LIFE

Believe it or not, there's an eco retreat slap bang in the middle of Manhattan — although the 24,000 plants in the lobby of 1 Hotel Central Park may make you feel you're in the wilderness. Everything from clothes hangers to room keys have been crafted out of recycled materials. There are myriad ways to cut back on waste too — you'll find a chalkboard next to the bed instead of a notepad and a five-minute timer in the shower. Plus, there's a Tesla private taxi service. The hotel's 1 Good Day scheme lets you volunteer on city community projects in return for Lyft credit and two free cocktails. *1hotels.com* **JOSEPHINE PRICE**

{ DID YOU *know?* }

2017 was the United Nations-designated International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development.

IMAGES: GETTY



Tech traveller

TECHNOLOGY REPORTER FOR @BBCCLICK AND AUTHOR OF *WORKING THE CLOUD*, KATE RUSSELL PICKS THE LATEST INNOVATIONS

INSURE MORE?

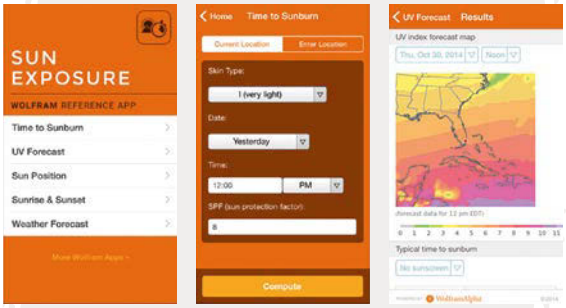
Standard home and travel insurance usually doesn't cover high-cost electronic devices. So how to stay protected?

Most of us pack at least one high-tech gadget for our travels, but how many of us have adequate insurance? The cheapest policies won't cover high-cost electronics. Check the 'single item limit' in the small print to confirm this. And while your home insurance policy might include cover for personal items while away, you should make doubly sure this includes foreign travel.

Some mobile phone contracts might cover you for foreign travel, but if not you can take out a specialist gadget policy. Premiums start from around £1.50 a month, but read the terms carefully so you know what's included and required; for example, many policies require you keep laptops in your hand-baggage, but due to terror alerts some flights between the UK and US now require you to put them in the hold. Also be aware that if you don't have the original receipt for your gadget it's highly unlikely an insurer will pay out on a claim.

One last tip for the smart traveller: take a photo of all the items you intend to travel with, laid out on the floor before packing. You can use an app like Snupps (*snupps.com*) to tag and catalogue everything. That way, if your case does go missing you have a clear record of what you lost, making the insurance claim process a lot less painful. Otherwise, consider leaving your most expensive kit at home.

TOP APPS FOR... *easy arrival*



WOLFRAM SUN EXPOSURE REFERENCE APP

IOS, £0.99

UV forecasts and advice on how long you can safely stay in the sun, according to your skin type and sun protection cream. *products.wolframalpha.com/referenceapps/sunexposure.html*

FOODSPOTTING

IOS/ANDROID, FREE

Check out other people's food photos and post your own — a great way to get, or share, the lowdown on a restaurant's food. *foodspotting.com*

EAT SMART MENU TRANSLATOR

IOS/ANDROID, £0.89

Find your way around menus in 13 countries. *eatsmartguides.com/eat-smart-abroad-app.html*

EVENT SEEKER

IOS/ANDROID, FREE

Discover upcoming events (concerts, gigs and theatre) wherever you're travelling. Links to music streaming apps. *eventseeker.com*



GET THE GADGET

Skyroam Solis

For the connected traveller, getting online and staying charged up will be a lot easier with this smart wi-fi hub and battery bank. The Solis allows up to five devices to connect simultaneously, delivering 4G LTE mobile wi-fi speeds in over 100 countries. There's no fiddly sim card switches as the hub uses an internal 'virtual sim', which links to an online portal where you can buy 24-hour unlimited data passes for $9 (£6.80) a day. Just connect your device, then activate a pass that continues delivering fast mobile data even if you cross borders. It comes with an adapter to charge up your device if you run out of power. RRP: $149.99 (£115) plus $9 (£7) a day data. *skyroam.com/solis-global-wifi*

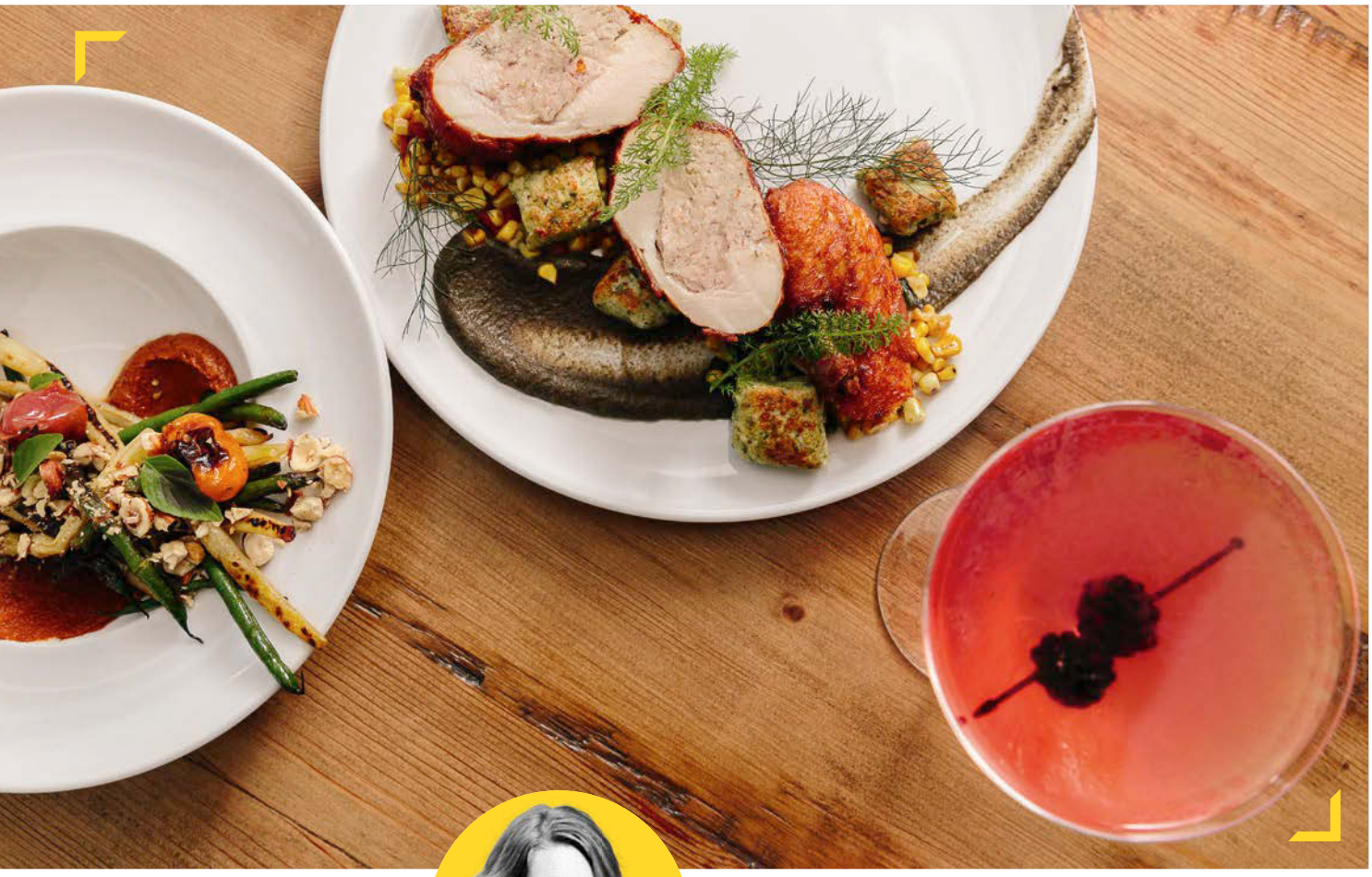


@katerussell
katerussell.co.uk

HOW I GOT THE SHOT

FOOD PHOTOGRAPHY IN CHICAGO

LUCY HEWETT, THE PHOTOGRAPHER FOR OUR CHICAGO CITY LIFE FEATURE ON P.134, EXPLAINS HOW SHE CAPTURES THE CREATIVITY OF CUISINE





In Chicago, food is an art form. Home to some of the world's top chefs, it's not difficult to find meals here that inspire the palate and the eye. Shooting food is always a fun exercise for me. My background is in graphic design, and in art school many of my assignments were about arranging basic shapes and colours to make interesting compositions within small canvases. I look back on these practices in all my photography, but it's most relevant when I shoot food.

I rely heavily on colour and contrast in my work, so when photographing food I'm always trying to create elegant compositions that let the chef's presentation come to life.

> I like bright, high contrast images, but I also want to make sure the food looks authentic and appetising

For this image, I wanted to get more than one dish in the picture to get a feel for the seasonality of the ingredients and overall perspective of the menu. It tells a more complete story of the restaurant and makes for an interesting image.

The restaurant, Eden, wanted to schedule the shoot for early evening, when daylight is softer. Chicago weather is about as unpredictable as it gets and the day of the shoot was overcast. There wasn't enough natural light to make the dish shine, so I used a Profoto B1 head on a light stand. I placed the light behind the plate and turned it away from the dish to bounce light into the corner of the white wall. The result is a nice even light with a bit of dimension that feels like you're eating next to a window on a sunny day.

I often bring a step stool for shoots so I can easily shoot from above without a tripod. With food photography it means I can move around, trying out different compositions and adjusting the table and garnish elements as I shoot. This was shot with a Canon 5D Mark III and a 24-70mm lens. The variety of focal lengths it offers is ideal for food and allows me to get the wider, plated arrangements, as well as the close-up images of the ingredients, resulting in a balanced sequence of images with plenty of variety.

lucyhewett.com
@lucyhewett

IN THE NEXT ISSUE



Our annual Cool List rears its head again, identifying the 18 destinations that will be making the headlines in 2018 — from hipster cities to remote escapes, don't miss out!

Plus *// Australia, Bangkok, Brussels, The Danube, Devon, Edinburgh, Iran, Italy, Kefalonia, Tbilisi*

JAN/FEB 2018 ISSUE ON SALE 7 DECEMBER 2017

For more information on our subscription offers,
see page 184

IMAGE: GETTY

EXPERIENCE CUBA LIKE AN AMERICAN

AMERICANS VISITING CUBA MUST ONCE AGAIN FILL THEIR TRIPS WITH 'PEOPLE-TO-PEOPLE' EXCHANGES — A DEVELOPMENT THAT'S OPENING FASCINATING DOORS FOR UK TRAVELLERS TOO. WORDS: LYDIA BELL PHOTOGRAPHS: ANDREA BERNAL

On a day of summer sunbursts and rain, we chug west out of Havana down the potholed motorway in a 1955 Chevrolet Bel Air. After much confusion and many U-turns we find it — a tucked-away farm called Finca Tungasuk that sits just off the road cutting through Artemisa, Havana's neighbouring farmland state. The driver complains that we're on a track to nowhere, that we need to turn back, when suddenly Alfredo the farmer appears surrounded by a bevy of barking dogs. With no doorbell to speak of and no proper road to this property, he relies on them to herald an arrival.

This is the home of Annabelle and Alfredo, a Nicaraguan chef who trained under Alain Ducasse in Paris, and a Peruvian UN election monitor, respectively. The couple escaped the rat race to become unlikely farmers in Cuba, wowing their local market with such exotic, un-Cuban fare as oyster mushrooms, homemade passata and six types of Latin American bean. On this idyllic 32-acre farm, on a picnic table outside their simple house, serenaded by the collection of small dogs and surrounded by orchids and butterflies, we enjoy lunch made by Annabelle with ingredients from their farm.

There's a Nicaraguan salad of cabbage, tomato, homemade pineapple vinegar and coriander; just-harvested broccoli and mushrooms with sauteed bok choi; roasted pork, smoked with guava tree leaves; smashed beans with coriander; yucca in a mojo sauce; red snapper with a panoply of salads; and some homemade soft cheese. It's probably the best food I've ever had in Cuba.

This has been one hell of a journey for Alfredo and Annabelle. Knowing nothing about farming, they relied on books, Google and the local septuagenarian-plus farm workers for advice. "They taught us about the moon's phases and cold fronts, and about fallow periods," says Alfredo. After the initial amusement (the workers called him 'the farmer who consults a book') they've developed a beautifully symbiotic relationship with the local neighbourhood, where the economy is based solely on bartering — yoghurt for broccoli, turkey for beans, tomatoes for 50-year-old seeds.

At first, the local authorities were suspicious. "I'd find people wandering over the land in the middle of the night, clipboard in hand," Alfredo tells me. Once they figured out he genuinely wanted to farm, they became extremely supportive, offering water pumps, pipes for irrigation and more land. "'The markets need more of your produce', they told us."

We walk up and down the gentle curves of his picture-perfect 32 acres, accompanied by the dogs, and visit his musty mushroom shed, his butterfly filled wild flower meadows, and the place he where he wants to build his water tanks. He's struggled to get his neighbours on board with his penchant for rewilding — this is a country in which they still follow the Russian habit of 'cleaning up' the land by burning off the vegetation.

As the sun dips over the glittering ocean on the far horizon, Alfredo and Annabelle wave us off down the overgrown path. They don't have a car and rely on neighbours with 1940s-era trucks to get in and out of Havana when they need to. It's an unusual life they've chosen but they seem content.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Annabelle and Alfredo; bok choi; 1955 Chevrolet Bel Air






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Rediscovery // During those years of Cuba slowly opening up to the world, intellectually curious and, in the main, educated Americans became the first to 'discover' the country again



I ended up on their farm because I asked my travel company to show me something surprising and different in regards to the food scene. Encounters like these have transformed the way a tranche of independent tourists experience this rich and complex island, and they've mainly come about since the US Treasury greenlit controlled travel to Cuba for Americans, via the so-called 'People-to-People exchanges' in 2011. What that meant was ticking a visa category entitled, mysteriously, 'Support for the Cuban people'. Then signing up to a rather staggering 8.5 hours of face-time with Cubans daily. Those Cubans, in turn, are charged with showing you the realities of day-to-day life on the island.

During those years of Cuba slowly opening up to the world, intellectually curious and, in the main, educated Americans became the first to 'discover' the country again. They were paired with locals who had specialised knowledge in everything from art to architecture, baseball to black history. These ordinary, yet extraordinary encounters have quietly shaped the re-flourishing of the relationship between Cuba and the US.

Under Obama, the US edict slackened off, with no one checking itineraries at all. That first tranche was joined by the second tranche — the youthful massive, often keen on a short break of sometimes thoughtless decadence. Ironically, with Trump bent on torpedoing the Cuban-American detente, and with the loosening of restrictions around Americans engaging with Cuba tightening up again, it looks like this kind of travel experience is back on the agenda. Which, from a travel perspective, seems a surprisingly positive side effect. For those who want to engage with the appealing and genuinely fascinating human side of the island, there really is no better way — and anyone can do it.

I've specified my interests as food, economics, theatre, interiors and the arts — and that's exactly what I'm getting. Always interested to meet new *cuentapropistas* (small business owners), who have emerged with the changing of the private sector laws, I visit the first above-board tattoo parlour in the cobbled, bougainvillea-drenched streets of Old Havana. A lot of tattooists left to pursue careers in the States, but Leo Canosa, owner of La Marca Body Art Gallery, somehow raised the cash to carve a funky studio out of this colonial house. Next to me, an earnest American student is having her torso tattooed with a small line drawing that copies one of José Rodríguez Fuster's iconic faces — Fuster is a local artist beloved of foreigners whose ceramic art dominates a small seaside barrio in western Havana.

Canosa is one of several interesting Cubans I'm privileged to meet. They include acrylic artists and old-school lithographers making amazing things in obscure suburbs; the millennial graphic artist-turned-video auteur Joseph Ros, director of cinematically beautiful music videos; and Alejandro Marrero, a super-bright theatre producer currently running three experimental projects from the university town of Santa Clara.

I also meet curator, Cristina Vives, whose name I recognise because she oversaw 'Nine Contemporary Cuban Artists' — an exhibition I saw in Miami's Freedom Tower before coming here. She tells me she studied and lived in Barcelona, but came back. "I could have stayed, but I realised that here, I could make a difference, and there, I wouldn't have been able to."

One of my best dates is with an eminent state economist in one of my favourite new-generation private restaurants in Havana. The night I first visited Hector Higuera's Le Chansonnier was the night I realised the food scene in Havana was changing forever. It was 2011 and we dined on perfectly crisped confit of duck prefaced by a miniature Camembert baked whole and tossed in a delicate chilli jam. It may not sound that amazing in the grand scheme of things, but seven years ago it was a gourmet confection in a food revolution that had finally arrived in Havana after many wilderness years.

Today, over similarly fine fare, I chat with the fascinating state economist Ricardo Torres Perez (associate professor at the state think tank Centro de Estudios de la Economia Cubana, CEEC). Impeccably styled in a 1950s *guayabera*, he's focused on transition economics (what centrally planned economies do next) and answers any question I have with surprising honesty. Does he think Cuba should follow Eastern Europe, China or Vietnam's way out of centralism? No, no, and no. He advocates a Scandinavian model: dynamic, global and technological, but, he says: "With higher taxation and a strong welfare state."

Within the global context, CEEC would be considered a left-wing think tank, but in the Cuban context, this modern voice isn't quite what I was expecting. Is the limited private sector enough? No. "The private sector has been put to play but is extremely confined. Having good restaurants is nice but it won't take us to the next level and stop intelligent youths from leaving." He fears for tourism because the focus is on the narrow aim of increasing visitors, when it should be an opportunity for sustainability. I could stay here and talk to him all day, but he has work to do.

My final person-to-person is part of a magical tour of Havana's black history. It starts in the Havana Bay town of Regla, where I stand among the candle-holding devotees of the black Madonna at the magical Nuestra Señora de Regla, most of whom are worshipping the Santeria deity of Yemayá, the *orisha* spirit of the ocean. It's a throwback to colonial days, when slaves fused African animist deities with Christian saints as a way of obscuring their spiritual activities amid oppressive colonialists, and remains to this day. Their fervour is a pulsating, physical, comforting energy that envelops me.

Here, among the domino players and ruined streets of the grittiest corner of working class Centro Habana, I'm welcomed into the Asociación Quisicuaba by its theatrical maître d', Enrique Aleman. His grandfather established this extraordinary institution in 1939 in order to study and practice Cuban religions of African root — whether that was Ifaismo, Palo Monte, Spiritism, Abakua or Santeria. These days the study comes with an extensive overlay of social projects — AIDS and transgender workshops and support, the support of addicts, or the feeding of the local poverty-stricken populace. On average, around 450 people pass through their soup kitchen every day. And this is all done via donation (engaging philanthropists globally), and, Aleman explains, "*Con mucho amor.*"

If you walk to the furthest reaches of this stained glass and antique-filled mansion, festooned with garish modern-day murals, you'll find a quiet room containing the paraphernalia of Afro-Cuban deities, ceramic urns burning candles and altars. This is a quick reference point to the atmosphere of Santeria and the soul of Cuba. Despite the rigours of socialism, Cubans' spiritual beliefs have endured, and over time melded. A typical Cuban could be baptised and read the Bible, consult a *babalao* of the Santeria faith, and a medium too.

In the same neighbourhood, I visit the eminent Cuban race academic Roberto Zurbano in a cramped, book-crammed apartment. Zurbano's life's work sits within the promotion of black role models and the fight for Afro-Cuban success. We talk about the black struggle, which he argues is in its infancy in Cuba. While the Revolution created a generation of black professionals, Cuba's economic struggles since the 1990s have seen an unravelling of socialism and a stagnation of black progress as the more privileged (read, whiter) population corners the more lucrative private enterprise market with remittances from abroad.

Why is he willing to meet foreigners I ask? To engender more positivity, he says. "There's been a lot of tourism that's been disrespectful or has created a superficial Afro-Cuban culture," he says. "In the past, tourism wanted to reduce it. And if you don't know what I mean, just go to Plaza de la Catedral, where you see black people dressed as slaves." His aim is to create a physical space where people can experience the positive side of black history. In his intellectual manner, he wants to call it Cafe Conscienca. It will, he says, be a project that conveys the power, the joy, the depth and the identity of the African milieu in contemporary Cuba.

"Let me ask you something: Who built all the big houses in Old Havana? Who cooked all the meals? Who was sold in Plaza Vieja? Havana was a black city filled with black music and black food. Blacks owned the streets because white Cubans didn't go out. They stayed inside to avoid the heat. On the street it was black people singing, selling, walking."

As I walk back through the unreconstructed, careworn streets of Centro Habana, the passion of the man's words ringing in my ears, I reflect that I haven't been on a single beach since arriving. Instead I've been lifted and inspired by a cavalcade of intelligence, passion and warmth. I highly recommend face-time with the people of Cuba — and you don't have to be an American to do it.





PREVIOUS PAGE: La Marca Body Art Gallery owner Leo Canosa
ABOVE FROM TOP: Asociación Quisicuaba; Roberto Zurbano in his book crammed apartment

MORE INFO

Finca Tungasuk. *tungasuk.com*
La Marca Body Art Gallery. *lamarcabodyart.com*
Le Chansonnier. *lechansonnierhabana.com*
Asociaction Quisicuaba. *cabildoquisicuaba.cult.cu/en*

BLACK TOMATO offers a five-night cultural break to Havana from £3,150 per person. Price includes accommodation at La Reserva Havana, B&B, privately guided people-to-people tours in Havana, private transfers and flights with Virgin Atlantic from London. The itineraries are fully compliant for US and non-US nationals travelling from the US or elsewhere. *blacktomato.com*

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Christmas
BUT NOT AS YOU KNOW IT

Ever fancied spending the Christmas holidays abroad? Whether the locals are setting fire to a Yule Goat or hiding from Knecht Ruprecht, it's likely to feel worlds away from your usual celebrations

Denmark
Every December, Danish television shows a series with 24 episodes, with the finale aired on Christmas Eve. These immensely popular *Julekalenders* (Christmas calendars) have been a fixture since 1962 and usually follow a hero trying to save Christmas.
SAY: Glædelig jul!

Germany
Not to be confused with *Weihnachtsmann* (Father Christmas), Nikolaus travels by donkey on Nikolaustag (6 December) and leaves treats in the shoes of good children, particularly in the Bavarian region. The story goes that he's accompanied by Knecht Ruprecht (Farmhand Rupert), a devil-like character who whips naughty nippers.
SAY: Fröhliche Weihnachten!

Spain
Most people go to the midnight mass — La Misa Del Gallo — and then wander the streets with lit torches, playing guitars and beating drums. One Spanish saying is 'Esta noche es Noche-Buena, y no es noche de dormir': there's no sleeping on Christmas Eve.
SAY: 'Feliz Navidad!' In Catalan regions, it's 'Bon Nadal'; in Galicia, 'Bo Nadal'; and in Basque, 'Eguberri on'.

Sweden
Since 1966, a 42ft tall Yule Goat has been built in the centre of Gävle's Castle Square for the Advent, but this tradition led to another: people trying to burn it down. The goat has been destroyed over 30 times. It's all part of Swedish Christmas fun.
SAY: God jul!

Indonesia
Although around 85% of the country is Muslim, there are still some 20 million Christians. In Bali, some locals make Christmas trees from chicken feathers! Cookies are a must-have festive food: try *nastar*, a butter cookie with pineapple jam filling; Kastengel cheese cookies; and *putri salju* or 'Snow White' cookies, a butter cookie covered with powdered sugar and cheese.
SAY: Selamat natal!

+Babbel

YOLO SO GO SOLO

WITH A GROWING NUMBER OF PEOPLE IN THEIR 30S AND 40S YET TO SETTLE DOWN BUT KEEN TO SEE THE WORLD, A HOST OF COMPANIES ARE OFFERING GROUP TRAVEL FOR LIKE-MINDED SOLO TRAVELLERS. WORDS: SIMON USBORNE

When Mona Rangar, sitting at the desk at which she'd spent most of her 30s, began idly searching the web, she didn't realise she was part of an emerging demographic. She just wanted a holiday, and was running out of people to go with. As she edged towards her 40s, memories were fading of an interrailing trip with an old boyfriend and of the time she gatecrashed her sister's US road trip.

"Literally from those two trips in my early 20s all the way through to my late 30s — oh my God, this is so sad — I was just focusing on my career," Rangar, now 40, says from Sydney, where she's been living since moving there from London last January. She grew up in Durham, North East England, and became a recruitment manager after studying law. "Then all my best mates got married and had kids. I found myself in the minority. I was single and really wanted to travel, but with other people."

It's a predicament a growing number of travellers find themselves in; thinking they're alone but increasingly discovering they aren't. Professionals in their 30s or 40s — probably single, perhaps divorced — they're successful in their careers and have money to burn, but neither the time nor the inclination to plan a solo adventure. Too old and liver-conscious to embark on an 18-30s trip to the Balearics, but too young to embrace the umbrella-following culture tours that dominate the over-50s market, they seek something in between.

"I'd been on a few family holidays but I really wanted to connect with other people who haven't settled down, but want to explore the world and have the money to spend on adventures and nice hotels," Rangar explains. "You've got that money because you've worked your arse off, but you don't want to sit in a hotel with your parents and nephews again. You want to go exploring and come back to a nice spa and have a drink with people in the same boat."

The cultural and familial expectations of marriage and parenthood — a background hum for most singletons of her age — were louder in Rangar's family. Her parents are both doctors who came to England from northern India in the 1970s. "It wasn't a strict family background but that cultural pressure to meet somebody and settle down started for me when I was about 22," she says. Online dating had brought only sporadic success and a holiday would be a way to escape that pressure, too.

Rangar's search, in 2015, led her to a new travel company for people just like her. Flash Pack, launched in 2014, is the brainchild of a married couple in their mid-30s who met online and identified a gap in the market. Between them — Lee Thompson, a photojournalist, and Radha Vyas, a business consultant — have visited more than 100 countries, frequently alone. "I once had to beg a married friend to come to Thailand with me, but it's not easy and I think a lot of people our age haven't seen group travel as an option," Thompson says.

The couple found plenty of companies set up to offer group travel to individuals, but nothing that felt like it spoke to them. To test the water, they posted on Meetup.com, inviting people in their 30s and 40s to talk about travel at a bar in central London. Unsure if anyone would show up, they were delighted when dozens did. "We started to get traction early on and it was also clear that our idea had global appeal," explains Thompson.

By the end of this year, Flash Pack will have taken about 2,500 solo travellers from 14 countries abroad. About 80% of them are single, and 90% join groups as individuals. It's clear from the company's website that Flash Pack is trying to challenge the stereotype of group travel, be it frazzled 19-year-old reps in Magaluf or besandaled greybeards in yet another medieval cathedral. "Forget your average holiday to the Costa del Dull. Your trips with Flash Pack will be a fully immersive travelling experience — served with a side of luxury," it reads.

When I spoke to Thompson in August, trips to stalwart destinations such as Peru and Southeast Asia were selling well, alongside glamping in Slovenia and a Vespa tour of central Spain. Rangar went for the company's most popular tour, a two-week trip to Cambodia and Vietnam that now costs from £2,229, excluding flights. Obligatory stops come with a twist; the boat tour of Halong Bay in Vietnam includes 'kayaking and karaoke', and there's a cookery class in Hoi An.

Individual needs

Demand for solo travel, be it in groups or truly independent, reflects the age of the individual in which we find ourselves. Government statistics for England and Wales show that the number of people living alone rose from 23% in 2002 to 26% in 2016. In London, almost a third of homes are now occupied by just one

IMAGE: GETTY



Looking out over Moraine Lake in Alberta, Canada



Nostalgic DRESDEN

Get a different perspective to Dresden — the capital of Saxony — and the beautiful surrounding scenery with a trip on the region's traditional transport

MAKE A SPLASH

Take to the romantic waters of Dresden on one of the region's traditional steamboats. The Saxony Steam Ship Company boats have been plying the Elbe for 179 years, making the fleet the largest and oldest of its kind in the world. A cruise along the River Elbe takes in the elegant towers and domes of Dresden's cityscape, quaint riverside villages and the dramatic scenery of Saxon Switzerland. *saechsische-dampfschiffahrt.de/en*





FULL STEAM AHEAD

For a step back in time, board one of the historic steam trains that chug along the Saxonian Steam Railways (SDG). For more than 100 years, the trains have offered a moving window on the landscape of this corner of Germany, with two journeys on offer. The Lößnitz Valley Railway offers stunning scenery as it crosses 19 bridges and a dramatic dam; while the Weißeritz Valley Railway takes in local brewing traditions as the oldest narrow gauge railway in Germany. *sdg-bahn.de*

HEAD FOR HEIGHTS?

Jump on the suspension or funicular railways and experience Dresden from above. Dating back to 1895, the funicular connects Dresden with the beautiful villas and townhouses of the Weißer Hirsch district and the Dresdner Heide forest, delivering beautiful views of the city and beyond. *dvb.de/en-gb/excursions/hillside-railways*

IMAGES: SYLVIO DITTRICH; FRANK EXSS; VERKEHRSVERBUND OBERELBE GMBH/MARTIN SCHMIDT

Dresden. Elbland.

dresden.travel
dresden-elbland.de
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Visit Dresden



A group travelling by 4WDs marvel at the Milky Way in Australia's Outback

person, while in New York and Paris that proportion is more than half. Restaurants are welcoming more solo diners. In 2014, a restaurant opened in Amsterdam, Eenmaal, with only tables for one, partly to fuel a growing conversation about eating alone.

Travel companies are also waking up to this growing appetite. Airbnb has noticed a rise in home-alone bookings, which now count for up to 27% of stays in some cities. The Association of British Travel Agents' annual survey found that 13% of holidaymakers in 2016 travelled alone, up from 10% in 2013. While those most likely to travel solo are over 55, of the age groups below that, those aged 35-44 were the most likely to go solo. When asked why, older travellers chose 'travelling to a new destination' as the main reason. For Rangar's generation, the biggest motivation was the 'opportunity to be able to do what I want'.

"The world is so fast-paced now," says Tom Marchant, 37, co-founder of Black Tomato, a British adventure travel company with a large young clientele. "When people look for time out now it's often for themselves, to disconnect not just from work but their whole social environment. They're thinking, 'I want that magical week alone and I almost want to be a little bit selfish'. We're talking about people who have achieved a level of independence and means, and have the confidence that comes with age."

Black Tomato isn't a solo specialist but is thinking about lone travellers a lot more than it used to. "Trips you'd associate with family or groups of friends are now attracting solo travellers," Marchant says. "That might be a solo walking safari in Southern Africa or an immersive culinary weekend in Copenhagen. Now when we develop products, we ask, 'does it work for solo travel?'"

As well as displaying a selfish streak, travellers in this age group no longer seem to feel the stigma that once beset the lonely holidaymaker. "We used to send out our brochures in opaque envelopes," says Andrew Williams, boss of Solos Holidays, which has been around for 35 years. "We couldn't put branding on our luggage labels either, because customers didn't want to be identified as single travellers. Now that's changed; travelling alone is a lifestyle statement."

Sian Jones travelled on her own to India as a divorcee in her early 40s when her friend stood her up at the airport. "This was before *Sex and the City* and *Bridget Jones* and it was like, 'poor you, haven't you got a friend?'" Jones, who is from Wales, recalls 20 years later. A midwife by trade, she had such a good time anyway that she launched Solitair Holidays in 1999, another major player in the solo travel market.

FIVE WAYS TO TRAVEL SOLO

HOSTELS
Hostels remain a good bet for the solo backpacker on a budget. Increasingly, they're much improved, often featuring chic interiors and hi-tech facilities.

SPECIALISTS
A few operators cater solely to the solo traveller. Solos Holidays and Solitair are two of the most established firms, but ask about the age range if you're worried.

AIRBNB
Solo bookings now make up more than a quarter of the site's stays in some cities, while Airbnb Trips makes it easier to plan adventures like cooking classes and comedy nights.

CRUISES
Cold economics traditionally sunk the ambitions of solo travellers with single supplements, but cruise lines are now laying on more single cabins and activities for individuals.

ADVENTURE
Group adventure travel helps remove the burden of planning and the risk of roaming solo. Wild Frontiers and Black Tomato have trips to remotest Pakistan and beyond.

IMAGE: GETTY



MONA RANGAR, 40, SYDNEY

Travelled with Flash Pack

I suppose I'm a good example of somebody who discovered the joy of travel a bit later in life. I did the interrailing thing in my early 20s after uni then a few family holidays, but after that my career took over and I never thought about it seriously. Then all my friends got married and had kids.

I'd dated through my 20s and 30s and had a couple of relationships but was always focused on my career. Then I realised I had no one to go travelling with. I didn't want to go down the 18-30 route, but I did want to travel with people like me.

I came across Flash Pack online in 2015 and went on its Vietnam and Cambodia trip. There was a girl from Japan and people from America, all in the same position. We stay in touch on Facebook. The holiday really was a win-win. I had a terrific time and made some lifelong friends in the process.





EMMA LONG, 45, BIRMINGHAM

Travelled with Solos Holidays

I used to run a sandwich shop and worked in my dad's estate agency business. Holidays were a week a year, if that, and my parents didn't really want to go abroad. But I've always wanted to see the world.

I've mostly been single, mainly through choice. I never found the right man, and George Clooney's gone now. And when people get into relationships they can drop their friends, which is sad, because I really wanted to travel with other people.

I found Solos Holidays online seven years ago and have done a few tennis and walking holidays. I like that you have a meeting point — usually the bar — but you can also break off in smaller groups or do your own thing. And I think attitudes have changed — people don't look at you any differently on a singles holiday.

LEFT: Camel caravan travelling through the Sahara Desert, Morocco

"People no longer tend to feel sorry for you," says Emma Long, a 45-year-old property manager and writer from Birmingham. "Now it's more like, 'good for you, I wish I could do the same!'" Long is single but has made some of her best friends on trips with Solos, to the Greek Islands, Malta, Turkey, the Algarve and Spain. She says romance has blossomed for other travellers, but that nobody sets out to find it. "That's also changed," Williams says. "10 years ago our strapline was 'holidays for the single, unattached traveller'. We've dropped the 'unattached' because we know a lot of couples who can't travel together."

Similarly, Flash Pack doesn't advertise itself as a dating service abroad, and says there's a growing niche within the new market of people on gardening leave or a sabbatical who might not be single. In the era of online dating and swiping right, people don't need to go abroad to meet other people. "I don't know of anyone really hooking up on my trips," says Rangar, who's now been on several Flash Pack holidays.

Flash Pack differs from most solo travel companies in two ways. The vast majority of its customers are happy to share a room, which is one way around what remains the scourge of the solo traveller: the single supplement. For Jones at Solitair, whose customers are older and generally want their own rooms, reducing the cost of travelling alone requires constant negotiation. "I try to persuade hoteliers that these people tend to spend a lot more in the hotel because they're frequently in the bar and restaurant," she says.

Flash Pack also stands alone in defining a fairly narrow age range. It suits customers like Rangar, but some companies and travellers prefer a broader approach. "An older dimension can give a different perspective on a place or its history," says Jonny Bealby, founder and managing director of adventure travel specialists, Wild Frontiers. "When you're sitting around a dinner table every evening for 14 nights, that's a positive not a negative." Bealby, who started the business in 2002, has noticed the growing demand. He recently took a trip to Pakistan where all but one customer was aged 35-50. Of the 60% of his customers who choose to travel in groups, most are solo travellers.

For Rangar, solo group travel has been a revelation. She made friends for life and marvelled at new sites and horizons. "It wasn't only the most amazing trip from a destination perspective, but it was also kind of what I needed personally," she says. "Meeting new people away from the drudgery of my career and finding out that there were other travellers in the same position as me, enjoying life and not having this label put on them. It just made me feel normal again."

MORE INFO

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Solitair. *solitairhols.co.uk*
Solos Holidays. *solosholidays.co.uk*
Wild Frontiers. *wildfrontierstravel.com*

IMAGE: GETTY


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FROM FLYING LEMURS AND JUNGLE-SMOTHERED MOUNTAINS TO RICE PADDIES, RIVERS AND ANCIENT CURSES, LANGKAWI'S HUMAN AND NATURAL WORLDS COLLIDE TO SPECTACULAR EFFECT

WORDS **BEN LERWILL**

At sundown, with the day's heat loosening its grip on the rainforest, the *colugos* begin to glide. They climb the tree trunks, spread their limbs, and leap into the dusk. Also known as flying lemurs, these nocturnal mammals — part-squirrel, part-monkey — soar some 160ft from tree to tree, the baggy skinfolds between their arms and legs stretched as taut as a parachute. Night has arrived, and the darkening sky is alive with airborne squares of fur.

Langkawi's 10-million-year-old blanket of rainforest is full of surprises, and gravity-scorning squirrel-monkeys are just the start. Alongside the white-noise cicada drone and the head-swim of botanic aromas, there are sky-high mahogany trees, flying snakes and moths the size of paper planes. Everywhere are figs, creepers and heard-but-not-seen birds with long and unusual names. It's the tropics at full throttle.

It's been 10 years since UNESCO awarded Langkawi its global geopark status, and the compact Malaysian archipelago scattered across the Andaman Sea is about as biodiverse as it gets. Three types of protected eagle boss the skies. More butterfly species are found here than in the whole of Europe. It even lays claim to being the first part of Southeast Asia to emerge from the primordial oceans, having poked its tectonic nose above water around 220 million years ago.

For some visitors, Langkawi is as much about its beach culture and duty-free malls as its natural uniqueness. The destination routinely draws more than three million annual arrivals, and handling high-volume tourism in a sustainable manner has at times proved challenging. After UNESCO issued a warning to clean up its act, steps were taken to help local communities understand just

IMAGE: GETTY

what an asset they had. The archipelago, it was stressed, is somewhere to be nurtured.

It's an asset young naturalist Abdul Fuad has built a career around. "Listen — in the trees," he says, as we kayak along the glassy green Kubang Badak River. He holds his finger up. A sharp weet-weet-weet can be heard, coming from the mangroves. "A greater racket-tailed drongo," he explains. "It can mimic 10 other birdcalls."

We continue onwards, until the only sound is the muted splash of our paddles. Our kayaks drift along at walking pace, keeping to the shade of the banks to escape the insistent sunshine. Bright fiddler crabs scuttle along the shoreline as fishermen bob past in search of barracuda.

The tidal river is a part of Pulau Langkawi, by far the largest of the 104 islands in the archipelago and one of the only two inhabited ones. It's roughly the size of Singapore but only has about 65,000 inhabitants, most of them ethnic Malays. The island has 28 mosques, one hospital and no university. The nearest thing I experience to a traffic jam is when cars slow for a monitor lizard to cross the road. "Young people often head to the mainland," a coconut vendor tells me. "But most of them come home again."

Back on the river, Abdul steers his kayak down a side channel. I follow, and we pass a mudflat crowned by a rotting boat hull. We stop paddling. "Langkawi was lucky in the 2004 tsunami," he says flatly. "Only one person died, because our outer islands acted as a barrier. But this boat belonged to a Thai fisherman. It was washed up here by the wave — 25 miles over the sea then another two miles inland along the river. Now, it stays where it is."

Langkawi's proximity to Thailand has influenced it in numerous ways. Its cuisine makes liberal use of lemongrass, coconut milk and chilli, to salivating effect, particularly alongside the abundant seafood. And the island also borrows architecturally from its northerly neighbour. The tiny fishing villages could be taken from a Thai postcard, and high-end resorts too mimic those on the country's southern coastline.

Fruits of the forest

I'm splitting my time here between two of the island's smartest hotels. First up is The Andaman, in the white-sand-and-rainforest amphitheatre of Datai Bay. Hornbills, swallows and kingfishers overfly its jungle surrounds, and several types of monkey roam here too. The long-tailed macaque is by far the most brazen — and the most common — of the bunch; known to be partial to the occasional minibar raid, while the dusky leaf langur is prettier and altogether less hedonistic.

The resort grounds are also a fine place for watching *colugos*. On an evening walk with resident naturalist Fendi, we see four curled up on a fig tree. Then suddenly, silently each glides off to settle on a different trunk. "They're herbivores," he says. "There's always fruit in the rainforest, so for *colugos* every evening's a good evening."

I walk to the beach. The night is warm, and out at sea squid boats create a wobbling line of lights on the horizon. In the moonlight I pick out the large, dark outline of Koh Tarutao, the Thai island that was once a notorious penal colony. Things turned nasty during the Second World War, when prisoners and guards were both left to fend for themselves without supplies. They banded together to become armed pirates, hijacking supply boats until the British Armed Forces were called in.

Britain, like Thailand, has exerted considerable sway on Langkawi. Malaysia was a British colony until 1957 and English remains widely spoken, but Thailand's links are older and stronger. Many islanders have part-Thai heritage, and the tale of Mahsuri, a beautiful young Thai woman who lived here in the late 1700s, has become a much-repeated part of island folklore.

According to legend, she was brutally executed after being wrongly accused of adultery. Some say that from her gaping wounds flowed white blood — proof of her innocence — while others insist that as she lay dying, a cloud of mist enveloped her body. With her last breath, Mahsuri cursed the islands to have seven generations of bad luck.

Several locals I speak to express a belief that this curse took effect, lasting right up until the mid-1990s, when Langkawi first found success as a tourist destination. And when floating idly down rivulets in a wooden canoe, surrounded by nothing but jungle, it's easy to forget just what a tourist hotspot the place has become.

I head inland, and after sampling the smoke and halal-sizzle of the food market in Kuah, the island capital, I visit Pantai Cenang. This is Langkawi's understated party zone, and a strip of open-air beach bars competes for space with a string of budget hotels. Guitarists are setting up on the sands, while travellers

CRAZY CREATURES



GREAT HORNBILL
Measuring up to 4ft long, the mighty hornbill is so large that each wing beat makes a whooshing sound. Their sunshine-yellow bills were once more prized than ivory and numbers plummeted, but they have climbed again in recent years.

WATER MONITOR
Although smaller than the Komodo dragon of Indonesia, the water monitor can still reach 10ft in length. Unlike their cannibalistic cousins, monitors are much less aggressive. That being said, they still eat pretty much everything, from insects to snakes.

SPECTACLED LANGUR
These adorable, pocket-sized monkeys are easily recognisable by the white rings around their eyes and their fluro-orange young. Rare troop arguments are settled by *ventro-ventro* hugging — essentially a good bit of belly rubbing.

FLYING SNAKES
Less scary than they sound, these beautiful snakes are small and only slightly venomous. They fly by launching themselves off trees and wiggling back and forth to catch the wind, seeming to swim through the air.

MUDSKIPPERS
This bizarre fish–out-of-water has essentially adapted to living on land. It 'walks' onto the shore by dragging itself along on its pectoral fins and uses its gills as a balloon-like air tank.



PREVIOUS PAGE: Spectacled langur
OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Great hornbill; fiddler crab; walking tour; street food vendors; the mangroves in the early morning; monitor lizard

IMAGES: BEN LERWILL; GETTY; AIDI ABDULLAH; NATURALLY LANGKAWI



EVERYWHERE ARE FIGS, CREEPERS AND HEARD-BUT-NOT-SEEN BIRDS



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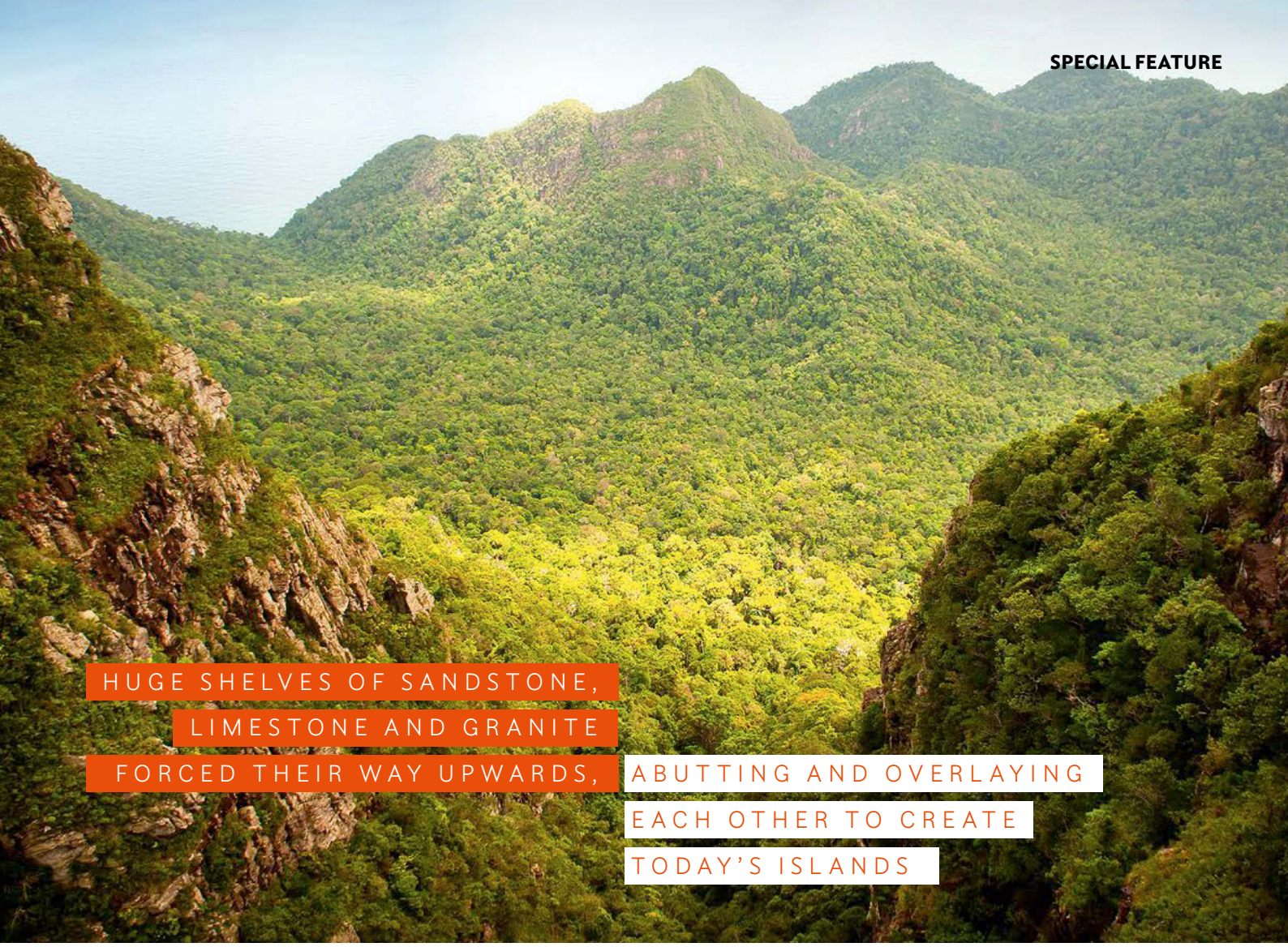
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HUGE SHELVES OF SANDSTONE, LIMESTONE AND GRANITE FORCED THEIR WAY UPWARDS, ABUTTING AND OVERLAYING EACH OTHER TO CREATE TODAY'S ISLANDS

IMAGE: GETTY

ABOVE: Langkawi landscape

flop on beanbags with beers and hookah pipes. Speakers are thumping out basslines, and the stars overhead are mesmerisingly clear.

The second portion of my week is at Four Seasons Langkawi, an all-out luxury resort with a vast palm-tree beach and a Geopark Discovery Centre. "We've had a British PM stay with us," one employee shares. "I can't say who, but Cherie and the kids were charming." Its geopark centre gives a good overview of the different rock formations that shaped Langkawi all those millions of years ago — huge shelves of sandstone, limestone and granite forced their way upwards, abutting and overlaying each other to create today's islands.

The resort covers such a wide area that guests have the option of using a bike to get around. I take the opportunity to cycle even further afield, joined by Yasin, a hotel staff member. We pedal past rice paddies and slow riverside villages. He points out wild fruit trees: papaya, banana, mangosteen and jackfruit. Fertility like this needs a rainy season, and a short tropical shower reminds me I'm in the middle of it. "We have Arabic guests that come every year especially for the rain," Yasin tells me. "They go to the beach and stand there, faces up and arms outstretched."

Falling for the archipelago is easily done. In 2008, a smitten local sultan bestowed the islands with a new title: Langkawi Permata Kedah. The name translates as 'Langkawi, the Jewel of Kedah', in reference to the wider state it forms a part of. The sultan's largesse was understandable. The entire archipelago has geopark status, but within its borders are three designated geosites, those parts of Langkawi considered to hold exceptional natural and geological significance.

The first is the jungle-smothered mountain range of Machinchang, the oldest rock formation on the islands, and a steep cable-car leads up to its 2,500ft summit. This is Langkawi's most popular attraction, meaning no shortage of souvenir shops and tour groups, but the views are stupendous. Up close, the ancient sandstone strata — originally formed under the sea more than half a billion years ago — lie horizontally like the pages of a book.

The second is Dayang Bunting, one of the outlying islands, with an enormous freshwater lake. Legend has it that the water has healing properties, helping women to conceive after bathing in it. Magic or otherwise, it's an awesome sight, ringed on all sides by high, shaggy trees and broad walls of natural marble. I take a short, enlivening swim and then make the five-minute walk back through the woods to the island's sea jetty. Monkeys scamper along the boardwalk and ladies in hijabs pull up on jet skis, patting down their clothes before wading onto land.

Langkawi offers plenty when it comes to modern holiday indulgences, and motorised watersports, spa treatments and island-hopping tours are all widespread. For me, the standout thrill is Umgawa, a new zip-line course set in thick rainforest. Two of its 12 lines stretch for almost 500ft — right across the valley — and the guides are both enthusiastic and well informed. They highlight the little and the large, from punkish caterpillars crawling up rattan palms to brochure-shot waterfalls crashing down the mountains.





FROM TOP: Birdwatching; mangrove viper

The third of the islands' geosites is the remarkable Kilim Karst Geoforest Park. It's still early in the morning when I arrive there by boat with Aidi Abdullah, the naturalist at Four Seasons and a man personally responsible for the first sightings of seven of Langkawi's 241 bird species.

"Let me introduce you to this lunatic ecosystem," he smiles, as we turn into a bay lined with jagged karst hills. Over the next three hours, our little vessel winds its way through a labyrinth of mangrove-crowded waterways. The trees themselves thrive in muddy, brackish conditions, filtering salt from the water and raising their hooped black roots above ground, sometimes elevating the central trunk a good metre into the air. "There's no other forest like it. They out-evolved all competition," Aidi explains.

If the mangrove banks are a compelling sight, so too are the creatures that live on them. Mudskippers are fish that can survive for up to eight minutes out of water, and we see hundreds of them hefting themselves along the shore by their flippers. One squares up to a crab and succeeds in standing its ground, a bizarre tableau that perfectly sums up Langkawi's mind-bending take on the animal kingdom.

"I've been doing these tours for 16 years. I can't give it up," says Aidi, before pointing out a coiled viper on a branch. "This is my paradise." As he talks, two white-bellied sea eagles pass overhead, heading inland to the sun-patched green mountains. Langkawi might be the oldest part of Southeast Asia, but it remains fiercely alive.

IN NUMBERS

99
islands in the archipelago (104 at high tide)

3
dedicated geosites within the global geopark

550
million years since the oldest rocks in Langkawi were formed

51
endemic butterfly species
(and more than 500 overall)



ESSENTIALS

Getting there & around

Malaysia Airlines flies from Heathrow to Kuala Lumpur (13h) and from there to Langkawi (1h). *malaysiaairlines.com*
There's no public transport, transfers are by taxi and car hire is readily available. Boat operators offer tours to outlying islands.

When to go

December-April is high season, with highs of 29C. April-August sees fewer crowds and occasional showers while September-October is the rainy season, but can still have up to seven dry hours a day.

More info

Naturally Langkawi. *T: +60 4 960 0600. naturallylangkawi.my*
Langkawi Development Authority. *lada.gov.my/en*

How to do it

AUDLEY TRAVEL offers a nine-night trip from £2,580 per person (based on two sharing on a B&B basis) with four nights at The Andaman, three at Four Seasons and two at Mandarin Oriental, Kuala Lumpur. The price includes flights, transfers and activities, including a cable-car rainforest and zip-lining tour. *audleytravel.com/malaysia*



IMAGES: AIDI ABDULLAH; NATURALLY LANGKAWI; ALAMY. ILLUSTRATION: JOHN PLUMER

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7 WAYS TO SEE LANGKAWI

Nature has been abundantly kind to Langkawi. The 99-island Malaysian archipelago is blanketed in rainforest, brimming with exotic wildlife, and home to towering mountain ranges as well as glorious jungle bays

#1 TAKE A TRIP TO THE CLOUDS

Arguably the most dramatic peak of all — and certainly the highest — is the Machinchang Formation, a soaring mountain range that lays claim to being the oldest part of Southeast Asia. Its sandstone layers were first formed under the ocean more half a billion years ago and have been above water for some 220 million years. By riding to the summit in the SkyCab cable car, which is the steepest of its kind in the world, you can enjoy superb panoramic views from the curved SkyBridge.

#2 LEARN SOME LOCAL CULTURE

Langkawi combines an intriguing mix of Malay, Thai and European influences, with plenty of opportunities to squeeze in some culture. The Rice Museum gives a glimpse into the cultivation of the country's most-prized resource, and visitors can even try their hand at rice farming. The Art in Paradise museum is dedicated to 3D art, and crawling into artworks is just the beginning, with exhibits including exciting optical illusions.



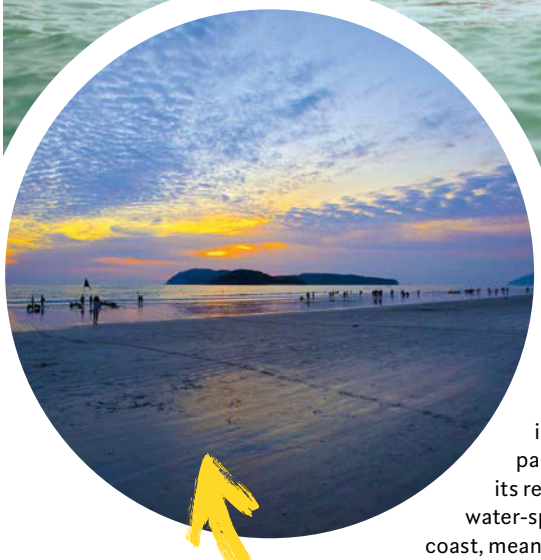
#3 EAT YOURSELF INTO A COCONUT-INDUCED COMA

The local food in Langkawi is divine, using plenty of lemongrass, chilli and coconut milk. Street markets make ideal — and cheap — spots for sampling local delicacies, from *pisang goreng* (fried bananas) to *mee goreng* (fried noodles). Langkawi also has a wonderful night market every night of the week, hosted at various spots around the island. Not only is the food great, it's an excellent opportunity to mingle with the locals.



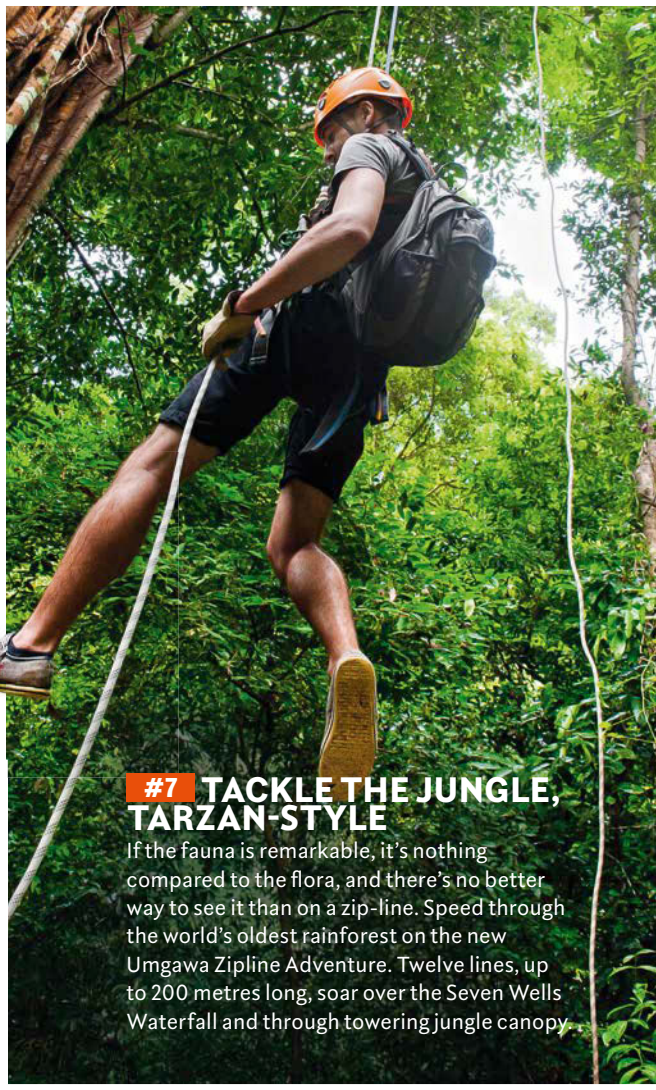
#4 JOIN A JET SKI TOUR

With 99 islands in the archipelago, the only way to see even a small percentage is by boat — or jet ski, of course. A four-hour tour takes in the area in all its glory — white sands, baby blue water and forested hills. Where the limestone cliffs are slowly worn away, there are a wealth of water-level caves to explore too, and under the sea, schools of rainbow-coloured fish dart from reef to reef.



#5 LIE BACK AND RELAX

Many come to Langkawi purely to enjoy the long white-sand beaches. In the south of the main island, Pantai Cenang is a particular focal point, with its relaxed open-air bars and water-sport options. On the north coast, meanwhile, spots like Datai Bay and the exclusive Tanjung Rhu Resort offer breathtaking jungle coastline views and miles of sweeping sands.



#7 TACKLE THE JUNGLE, TARZAN-STYLE

If the fauna is remarkable, it's nothing compared to the flora, and there's no better way to see it than on a zip-line. Speed through the world's oldest rainforest on the new Umgawa Zipline Adventure. Twelve lines, up to 200 metres long, soar over the Seven Wells Waterfall and through towering jungle canopy.



#6 BECOME AN IRONMAN

Among all active holiday pursuits, participating in an Ironman has to pack the biggest punch. Set to return in 2018, this epic race starts with a swim from the white-sand beach of Pantai Kok and takes athletes on a journey through dense rainforest, mangrove clusters and over Datai's rolling hills. The scenery is nothing short of spectacular — Langkawi is a Global Geopark; its nature deemed to be of priceless natural value, and this race takes in the best of it.



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IMAGE: GETTY

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Readers, this is your space. Let us know what you think about the magazine, give us your unique travel tips, or simply ask us a question. You can Instagram, email or tweet us!

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Win

Next issue's star letter wins an American Tourister Soundbox suitcase worth £125!

Soundbox's groovy, award-winning medium-size suitcase is secure, light and tough, and features a playful circular design. Expandability, fixed TSA lock, four smooth-rolling wheels and practical inside organisation all help to make this a great suitcase choice. *americantourister.co.uk*

IMAGE: GETTY



★ STAR LETTER

High praise

I am an experienced traveller and on a recent flight I read your September issue from start to end. Your winning formula is, I believe, the combination of great writers and contributors, and world-class photos. And there's always an added touch that sets you apart: with this issue, it was the Donegal mini guide, which has inspired me to book my first trip ever to Ireland!

What I want from a travel magazine is information I can go back to at a future date; I find other magazines can be a little bit 'chatty' rather than working as a tool for planning and booking with precision. Well done to your team! **NAIM HARIS**

When in Italy

Your feature on Puglia (June 2017) really brought to life the region's culture and gastronomy. I've travelled there several times. It has a unique identity and is certainly a great alternative to other much-trodden regions in Italy. I found hiring a car to be a good idea: coastal *strade statali* (A roads) are a joy. Try driving around Otranto: it certainly compares with the Amalfi Coast — just without the stress of traffic and coaches! And treat yourself to local seafood pasta and snack on *panzerotti*, lightly fried pasties full of local hams and melted cheeses. But, be careful of Puglian red wines — they're strong and robust. A couple of glasses will set you up for a two-hour siesta under a tree! **NIGEL COX**

Roads less travelled

I left home when I was 15 to go to Australia — it was the 1950s and I travelled throughout the Pacific. In the late '60s, I took off again, overland backpacking around the UK, then I got a VW campervan and went to India. I've done a great deal of travelling since and I've never really liked doing the 'tourist thing', so I don't rate most magazines. But your magazine really does hit the spot with interesting, off-the-beaten track features. I normally read it two or three times, cover to cover, to fully absorb it. **JULIAN DE MORTIMER**



Chat back

NatGeoTravelUK

Have you had an unusual #iceadventure? Skijoring on a frozen lake or kayaking by a glacier, maybe? Share your story here... #travel #NGTUK

POLLY RUSYN After lunch with a Saami family in Swedish Lapland, their one-antlered reindeer took me on a terrifying high-speed lap of their sled track! // **LEE MURRIN** Kayaking by glaciers in Alaska — amazing // **@DRTEMPLEDRAGON** I danced to the *Frozen* classic, *Let It Go*, outside the iconic doors of the Icehotel in Sweden

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Your Pictures

We give you a theme, you give us the photos, with the best published in the next issue. This month is 'coast' — the theme of our November 2017 cover story

We like how Deanna's image captures the rugged coastline of Cornwall with its wildflowers and weather-beaten rocks. The wave creates an ombre effect of turquoise blues, colours not typically associated with the seas around the UK.

NOW OPEN

The theme: 'Australia'. Upload your high-res image, plus a one-sentence description, to *ngtr.uk/yourpictures* by 9 December 2017.



THE PRIZE

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1 DEANNA L CHILD // READING: From the edge of the cliff at Tintagel Castle in Cornwall, I could see the waves crashing and got my camera out to catch the effect.

2 LANCE BELLERS // BRIGHTON: I spotted this surfer on the shoreline while I was walking back along the pier at Hastings. There was just enough light left for him to do his stuff — and me to take the shot!

3 SHARON WATSON // BEDFORD: I recently visited Skomer Island to get some photographs of Atlantic puffins. There were thousands to choose from, but this one really caught my eye as he popped his head up from among the daisies.

To find out more about the next theme, enter and for T&Cs visit **NATGEOTRAVELLER.CO.UK**







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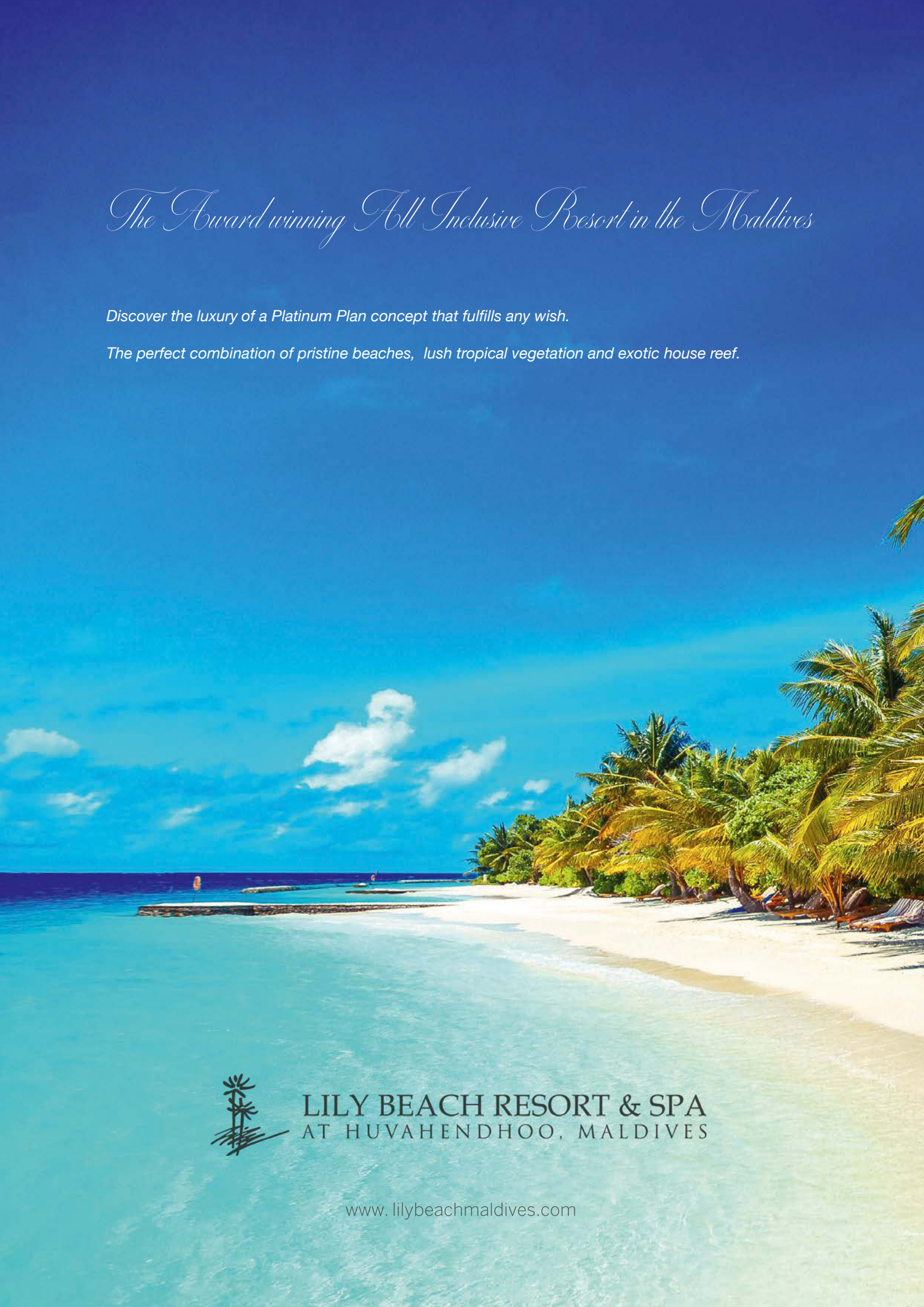
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